

“Lessons Learned”

Ecclesiastes 2:11-26

Have you ever done something that seemed like a good idea at the time, but after the fact, you wish you would have not done it? When I was a kid, one of those bad decisions involved grabbing an electric fence because of a dare. And needless to say, when we are speaking to others about our experience, we often say something along the lines of, “I sure learned my lesson!”

It has been said that the second kick of a mule isn't educational. Humility listens to and gleans from the experiences of other people. Youth would do well to listen to the wisdom and experience of age. We can be spared much pain in life if we learn from the lessons of others. And think of how much more true this is as it applies to the lessons we learn from those in Scripture.

Romans 15:4—“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

We ought to pay careful attention to what has been written!

I think that if I had the opportunity to speak to a group of unbelievers using a book of the Bible, I would take them to Ecclesiastes. It gets to where we live. It shows us what life is like in a Genesis 3 world, how apart from God all that is done under the sun is empty of real meaning.

All of us desire meaning in life, and that's true no matter who you are. Our search for it often leads us down winding paths filled with short-lived bursts of satisfaction that shine bright for a brief time but eventually wane. When we attempt to find ultimate meaning in the pursuit of pleasure, or through a

successful career, or in our educational pursuits, we will eventually find all of these roads to be a dead end.

For a season in his life, King Solomon tried to find ultimate meaning in things such as knowledge, pleasure, work, and wealth. As he reflected back on all of his pursuits under the sun, he described them as chasing after the wind. The things that he thought would satisfy him only ended up disappointing him in the end. Apart from God, it was all an empty pursuit. And in retrospect, he says to us here in this passage, “I learned my lesson!” We would do well to learn from his experience.

What lessons did Solomon learn, and what application do they have for our lives today?

1. Life’s amusements cannot SATISFY me (2:11-12)

“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. 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.”

At the close of chapter one and on into chapter two, the Preacher summed up his relentless investigation and experimentation with various amusements in life. In a way, you can see how Solomon’s pursuits broadly represent all of the things that people tend to live for, things such as knowledge and education, sensual pleasure, career, and the acquisition of wealth.

First, he says, “I couldn’t **learn** my way to life.”

The first stop on his quest to find ultimate meaning led him to pursue knowledge and wisdom. In 1:17, he says that he applied his heart to know wisdom, madness, and folly. He wanted to see if life's mysteries could be solved through knowledge and education. But by his own admission, the more he learned, the more confused he became.

There were plenty of things in life that he could not explain, things that just didn't seem to add up. What was crooked could not be made straight, and what was lacking could not be counted (1:15). And so he came to the conclusion that man's wisdom is insufficient. It cannot satisfy.

Second, he says, "I couldn't **feel** my way to life."

When knowledge only got him so far, Solomon then turned to pleasure-seeking. Intellectualism was a dead end road, so maybe ultimate meaning can be found in hedonism. He gave himself to pursuits that brought him physical pleasure.

He says in verse 2:

"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was vanity."

Information didn't bring him the satisfaction he wanted, but perhaps experimentation would. And so he sought how to cheer his body with wine and his heart with laughter. For a moment, it all felt good. It warmed his heart and brought him a tingling sensation. But it was all fleeting pleasure. It didn't last, and the emptiness that followed after was more hollow than when he had first started.

Third, he says, "I couldn't **work** my way to life."

When intellectualism and hedonism left him feeling empty, he then turned to professionalism. Solomon buried himself entirely in his career. He built fancy buildings for himself and planted exquisite gardens for himself. And notice the repeated use of personal pronouns throughout the whole chapter—I, me, my. There's no mention of others here!

Which by the way, as good as humanitarian effort is, it is still not something you can find your ultimate meaning and worth in. Sometimes people will substitute doing things for others as a relationship with God. You can make an idol out of your humanitarianism the same way that you can with your professionalism. Authentic faith will demonstrate itself through social action, but social action is no substitute for authentic faith.

Fourth, he says, "I couldn't **collect** my way to life."

He acquired great wealth and accumulated great riches.

His treasury overflowed with gold, silver, and the things that humanity attaches great value to. But the more that he got, the emptier he felt.

He went after knowledge, and when it didn't satisfy he went after pleasure.

When pleasure didn't satisfy, he went after work. And when work didn't satisfy, he went after wealth and possessions. Yet neither did that satisfy the longings of his heart. So what did he do? He says, "I considered."

"Considered" — *to turn toward and closely inspect*

It is the idea of stopping to consider the direction one's life is headed. Which by the way, the busier we are, the less we do this. I mean, really, when is the last time that you stopped to consider the way that you are living your life? The way that you are expending your energy? The way that you are investing your

resources? When he stopped to carefully consider all that he had lived for, he came to the conclusion that it was vanity and grasping for the wind.

The world's most successful man is being transparent.

I heard a story about a fellow who went to a psychiatrist in order to find some relief from his anxiety. The man woke up in a depression every morning. He could barely make it through the day. No matter what direction he turned, he couldn't find any relief. So in his desperation, he turned to a medical professional. The psychiatrist listened to him for about an hour. Finally, he leaned toward his patient and said, "I know just what you need! The circus is in town, and as I understand it, there's a clown who is absolutely leaving the crowd in stitches. He's getting rave reviews from the critics. Maybe he's the one who can bring back some happiness to your life." And after a few seconds of awkward silence, the man responded, "Doc, I'm the clown!"

Solomon is saying to us here, "I'm the clown! I'm the one who is supposed to have all the answers." Yet in all of his wisdom, he couldn't find ultimate meaning in the very things that we often make most important. So why not take Solomon's word for it? Why go down the same road?

2. Life's achievements do not SEPARATE me (2:13-17)

"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.”

When Solomon considered all that he had acquired for himself—his knowledge and learning, the respect from those around him; when he considered all that he had achieved—the buildings, gardens, and wealth—he then came to a startling discovery. What was the discovery?

His wisdom and wealth didn't separate him from the rest of humanity. He will make his point through the use of both contrast and comparison.

Notice he says in verse 13 that there is a contrast between wisdom and folly. There is more gain in being wise than in being a fool. To be sure, there are more advantages to wisdom than folly, and Solomon recognizes this. There is a right way to approach life, and there is a wrong way. It is better to be in the light than to be the dark.

(illus. of finding your way in the dark)

He says that wisdom is more valuable than foolishness because it enables us to see. The person with wisdom has 'eyes in his head,' but a fool walks in the dark. I think of those who rule out the existence of God in their thinking. Their denial is not truly out of a lack of evidence, but it is born out of their blinded and sinful heart. There is no one so blind as he who will not see.

By way of contrast, Solomon says that it is better to be wise than a fool. But it is the comparison that he makes of the two that really disturbed him. He says, "I perceived that the same event happens to all of them."

Despite all of his wisdom, Solomon recognized that he could not save himself from death. As goes the fool, so also goes the wise. As a person goes through

life, it is much better to be wise than a fool. But the same thing happens to both in the end. In other words, some die wealthier and wiser than others, but everyone dies. So what is the ultimate point of wisdom?

That is the issue that he had to grapple with. Death is the great equalizer of all. Take a trip to a local cemetery and try to figure out who was the wise man, and who was the fool. See if you can determine who was wealthy from who was poor, or who was happy from who was sad.

Solomon says, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" The wise goes to his grave the same way that the fool goes to his.

Listen to how he responds in verse 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."

It is almost as if he is sort of spiraling down into a state of depression and despair as he looks back on all of his empty pursuits. We would say that he is hitting rock bottom. And yet his experience shows, perhaps more clearly than anything else in Scripture, the reality of life without God. Under the sun, from nothing more than a human perspective, it is all void of meaning and purpose.

All of Solomon's wisdom and wealth could not save him from death. He comes to the realization that sooner or later every person must come to. It is the shocking realization that says, "One of these days, I'm going to die. One of these days, my heart will beat one final time. My lungs will take one last breath. And when that happens, my brief sojourn on earth will be over."

Philip Graham Ryken—*“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 bones. When Alexander asked what he was doing, Diogenes gave this reply: ‘I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves.’”*

The psalmist made the same point:

Psalm 49:10—“Even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.”

The psalmist’s point is that man, in all of his pomp and in all of his pursuits apart from God, it will all end in the grave. Nothing beyond that. He goes on to say in the next verse:

Psalm 49:11—“Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names.”

They laid claim to land and wealth and success and every other pursuit in life, but they had no power in the day of their own death. Humanity can do nothing to reverse the common lot of us all. We cannot save ourselves.

So what are we to do? Where are we to go? To whom do I turn for salvation?

The psalmist doesn’t leave us in the dark, for he goes on to say:

Psalm 49:15—“But God will ransom my soul from the power of the grave, for He will receive me.”

The psalmist says, “My hope is in the Lord! My confidence is in One who has power over the grave.” I need Someone to save me from the power of the grave, and only one Person in human history qualifies—Jesus Christ!

So the Preacher says, “Listen well and learn from me, my friend!” Pay attention now. Whether you are rich or poor, a person of degree or not—death will bring an immediate end to every advantage you think you have in life.

3. Life’s enjoyments will not SUCCEED me (2:18-26)

“18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 23 For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.”

Solomon says, “When I saw all that I had lived for, I only ended up hating life because the stuff that I worked so hard for, I had to leave it for the man who came after me!” He is expressing his despair over the fact that his enjoyments in life could not succeed him in death. The things that he had went after in life went up in smoke when he weighed them against the backdrop of his own mortality.

The money that you worked so hard to put back is only going to go to someone else. The dream home that you built will one day become someone else’s starter home. The valuables that you collected will end up in a rummage sale after you’re gone.

Solomon says, “I saw that I couldn’t take it with me!” I saw that I had wasted much of my life, and I hated it.

It is almost as if Solomon were expressing the same idea that Paul did when he said, “O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” From an ‘under the sun’ perspective, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes helps us see the hopelessness of our situation.

- I can’t put my confidence in wisdom because I can’t think my way into life.
- I can’t put my confidence in pleasure because I can’t feel my way into life.
- I can’t put my confidence in a career because I can’t work my way into life.
- I can’t put my confidence in wealth because I can’t achieve my way into life.

But I can put all of my confidence in **Christ**, who alone will give me eternal life when place my faith in Him, believing in His death and resurrection. If I don’t see the hopelessness of my situation outside of Christ, then I will never come to love and trust Him.

That’s why the Preacher says what he does at the close of chapter 2. Do you want life? Do you want true enjoyment? Then recognize where it comes from. It isn’t found in the things of life themselves, but in the One who gives them as token expressions of His grace. Look at verse 24-25:

“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”

Eight times in the book, the Preacher will refer to eating, drinking, and enjoying life. And his point is that life must be understood for what it is as a gift from God and not be mistaken as the ultimate end. Life apart from Him is vanity, chasing the wind. But life in Him is full of meaning, joy, and satisfaction.

Listen, what the Preacher does here in Ecclesiastes is so important. Before a person will ever come to Christ, he or she needs to see life as it is presented here. I think for a lot of people, Jesus is nothing more than a fire escape. He's not the entry way into life, but He's merely a fire escape. If you don't see Him as the Door, you've totally missed the point of the gospel. Christ is my salvation from hell and judgment—but He is also my life. 'Fire escape' Christianity wants the benefits of having Jesus as a Savior, but not the demands of having Him as a Lord.

The Preacher hated life when he considered the certainty of death and his own mortality. Yet such dissatisfaction was just what the Doctor ordered. It was the best thing for him because it took his eyes off of his life 'under the sun' and directed his gaze a bit higher to the hand of God.

Perhaps you've come to hate life for whatever reason, be it chronic illness or financial strain or broken relationships. And the best wisdom the world can offer is nothing more than an empty platitude—"When life gives you lemons..." It only produces more despair. The only way out is the way up, my friend. You have got to get your eyes off of the circumstances themselves and fix them upon Christ.

Colossians 3:1-4—“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

If you want to love life instead of hate it, then these words are just what you need! Because Jesus Christ is alive, the grave is not the end for those who place their faith and trust in Him.