



Trial and Error

Introduction

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes is the same as us. He set out to explore “all that is done under heaven” (1:13), and he was determined “to find out what is good” (2:1 NIV). In 2:3 he tells us that he wanted to “see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.” His was a quest for satisfaction and meaning in life, and he pursued it by giving himself to wisdom, comedy, pleasure, alcohol, projects, and possessions. As he did so, he held happiness in his hands—and then felt it slip through his fingers like water and vanish down the drain. Forever.

These verses are the video diary of his adventure through life. First stop is Jerusalem University, in 1:16–18. He studies and grows in wisdom. He learns from every professor and passes all his exams. He studies philosophy. He begins to understand how and why he understands. He studies the opposites of sanity and wisdom—madness and folly—to see what light they shed on understanding. All combine to be “a striving after wind” (1:17). He learns so much and yet his heart aches like the man who knows nothing (1:18). Degree certificates line his study walls, but his tears are the same as the person working on the street who never even went to school.

“If ignorance is bliss,” wrote the teacher on the boy’s school report, “then this pupil is going to be the happiest person in the world.” We believe, of course, that the opposite is true. We are sure education can save us from all our ills and place us on the road to happiness. The Preacher shows us that this particular pursuit is as old as the hills. Get into the best schools, study hard, achieve the best results, learn and learn and learn, get up the ladder, and you’ll go far. Aim at the top and the sun will shine. Join the academic professionals and you will surely soar on the new heights of your knowledge. It is not so, says the Preacher. The more I knew, the sadder I became.

He discovered that although we pursue happiness in every corner of our lives, in the same corners lurks the darkness of diminishing returns. In the end, achievements and pleasures do not last. Everything is ephemeral. Happiness is a vanishing vapor. All our bubbles burst eventually.

If this sounds too bleak and pessimistic, I suspect it’s because you haven’t reflected at length on the brevity of life. If you haven’t ever wondered why it matters what you do, given that one day you will be a forgotten nobody, then you haven’t thought much about the reality of death. When we sit down and try to face it head-on, the Preacher’s words begin to bore into our skulls. “What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?” (2:22). Not a lot, is the honest answer.¹

¹ Gibson, David. Living Life Backward (pp. 39–42). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

Open It

1. What is something that you had to learn through the process of trial and error?

Read It

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Explore It

2. What was “the Preacher’s” quest or goal to accomplish?
3. What kinds of things did he pursue to accomplish his goal?
4. What were some of the shortcomings of his pursuit of wisdom and living a life of wisdom?
5. What were some of the shortcomings of his pursuit of self-accomplishment and achievements?

Apply It

The Hebrew people rightly believed that God made man to enjoy the blessings of His creation (Ps. 104; and note 1 Tim. 6:17). The harvest season was a joyful time for them as they reaped the blessings of God on their labor. At the conclusion of his book, Solomon admonished his readers to enjoy God's blessings during the years of their youth, before old age arrived and the body began to fall apart (Eccl. 12:1ff.). Eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon used the Hebrew word meaning "pleasure," so it is obvious that he did not consider God a celestial spoilsport who watched closely to make certain nobody was having a good time.²

6. What are some of the blessings from God in which you have recently found pleasure?

7. How might Christians inadvertently portray God as the "celestial spoilsport"?

8. How do we as Christians corporately demonstrate the great pleasure and joy found in the Lord? How does your life display the joy of the Lord?

² Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Satisfied (Ecclesiastes): Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life (pp. 39-40).

9. How do you enjoy the pleasures of God's creation without becoming caught up in them and consumed by them?

The Preacher will argue that wisdom, pleasure, work, and possessions are very often the bubbles we live in to insulate ourselves from reality. And his needle, the sharp point he uses to burst the bubbles, is death. It is the great reality facing all human beings as they go about their business on earth. Death is the one ultimate certainty that we erase from our minds and busy ourselves to avoid facing.

In this section, however, a very surprising shaft of light begins to break into this seemingly depressing thesis. Far from being something that makes life in the present completely pointless, future death is a light God shines on the present to change it. Death can radically enable us to enjoy life. By relativizing all that we do in our days under the sun, death can change us from people who want to control life for gain into people who find deep joy in receiving life as a gift. This is the main message of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell: life in God's world is gift, not gain.

The gift of God does not make this meaninglessness go away; the gift of God makes this vanity enjoyable.³

10. Explain how viewing each breath of life as a gift might change someone's perspective on life?

³ Gibson, David. *Living Life Backward* (p. 37). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

11. Take a moment to consider your own mortality. What are some of your initial reflections?

12. Look up Psalm 39:4-6. How does the perspective of death influence how you live your life “today”? What changes might it encourage you to take in how you are prioritizing use of your time, talents, and treasures?

Solomon viewed all his labor during his lifetime ("under the sun," Ecclesiastes 2:18) with despair, because there was no real permanence to its fruits. He could not take them with him.

"A Jewish proverb says, 'There are no pockets in shrouds.'" [Note: Wiersbe, p. 490.]

Solomon would have no control over what he had accumulated or accomplished after he died, either (Ecclesiastes 2:19). The idea so common today that a good job is more desirable than a bad job because it yields benefits the worker can enjoy is a very short-sighted, selfish view. It seems to contradict Solomon's conclusion, but it does not. Solomon's perspective was much broader and more altruistic. He was thinking about what long-range changes for good could come out of all human toil.⁴

13. Solomon longed for lasting value but couldn't find it. In view of eternity, what areas of your life become less "valuable" and what areas become more "valuable"?

14. How would you define a successful life?

⁴ Constable, Dr. Thomas. Study Notes. Found at <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/eng/dcc/ecclesiastes-2.html>

Solomon is not advocating “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!” That is the philosophy of fatalism, not faith. Rather, he is saying, “Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God.” Paul gave his approval to this attitude when he exhorted us to trust “in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17 NKJV)... It is not enough to possess “things”; we must also possess the kind of character that enables us to use “things” wisely and enjoy them properly.⁵

15. How might living in a culture built around consumerism create challenges for you to “keep the main thing the main thing”? What are some ways the church or your small group provide a place to encourage and support each other in this?

16. What kind of character “enables us to use ‘things’ wisely and enjoy them properly”?

⁵ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Satisfied (Ecclesiastes): Looking for the Answer to the Meaning of Life (p. 46). Kindle Edition.

Take a moment to make Psalm 39:4-6 your personal prayer before the Lord.

4 “O Lord, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!

5 Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah

6 Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!