

Oh, A Wise Guy, Eh?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 June 12, 2024

I found a fun list this week: *The Dumbest Research Studies Of 2016*.¹ One found “a healthy diet helps you live longer.” Another discovered “most of your Facebook friends aren’t really your friends.” My favorite was, “Spiderman doesn’t exist.” Researchers at Cambridge have conclusively determined that it is “virtually impossible for a normal sized human being to have the characteristics of Spiderman.”

Tonight the Teacher invites us into his lab where he has been running incredibly important experiments for a *lifetime*. As researchers often do, he gives us the abstract up front: Hevel, hevel, everything is hevel. His work has left him frustrated and still full of questions.

His research project wasn’t dumb - he was asking the questions every human being wrestles with at some point. In fact, this is maybe the most needful study ever conducted.

And his problem wasn’t that he was out of his depth. In our verses tonight, the Teacher gives his credentials and reveals his methodology, showing the impeccable quality of his research. He’s not just a hobbyist trying to divert himself. He’s capable and well-funded - fully qualified.

On top of that, he’s driven by desperation. Like all people, he has a need for meaning and purpose. To his credit, he’s unwilling to simply ignore the problem. Instead, he dedicated his life to finding the meaning of life. And what he found is that these answers elude us, like smoke in the wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 - ¹²I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastes never *specifically* names Solomon as the writer, though it’s obvious the book wants us to assume it is Solomon speaking.² Many modern commentaries say it’s definitely not Solomon - that it’s some later writer, after the exile, who is writing a “fictional royal autobiography.”³

The problem with that idea is that if the Teacher is *not* Solomon - if he’s just some guy doing a thought experiment or speaking from his own theoretical philosophy - then his findings can’t be trusted. Do you want a pilot who never *really* went to flight school?

He was the king over all Israel (not a divided kingdom) in Jerusalem. That alone narrows it down to Solomon, not to mention the other clues in the book.

Solomon speaks with credibility.⁴ As king he had total ability, complete privilege, all the funds necessary, to explore these questions to the fullest possible extent *and then some*. So if there was

¹ <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/these-are-the-8-dumbest-research-studies-of-2016/275060>

² Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

³ Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

⁴ Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

anyone out there who had the time, the resources, the knowhow, the freedom, and the capability to get to the bottom of these questions, it was him.

Ecclesiastes 1:13 - ¹³ I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied.

Twice tonight, the Teacher will explain that he “applied his mind” in these pursuits. Your version may say heart instead of mind. Linguists tell us the Hebrew phrase is, “I gave my heart...the whole self”⁵ to finding these answers - to finding the meaning of life.

This wasn’t just a weekend whim. It wasn’t like one of those scenes where the spoiled prince shows up to the battlefield in pristine armor while everyone knows he’ll never do any real fighting. The Teacher was disciplined and purposeful. He was “deliberate, not dabbling.”⁶

He said he was going to examine and explore *wisdom*, which here could be defined as “the art of success.”⁷ He did it more than anyone who came before or after him. But his study left him frustrated and unfulfilled. He described all his intellectual pursuits as “miserable tasks” - heavy bags God puts on us to weigh us down and waste our lives. Wow.

How could the Solomon of Proverbs say such a thing about wisdom? In Proverbs 3 he said, “Happy is the man who finds wisdom.”⁸

It’s because the wisdom of Proverbs 3:13 is *not* the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 1:13. Notice, the wisdom here is “under heaven.” Philip Ryken writes, “The kind of wisdom the Preacher had in mind was not divine wisdom but human wisdom—the very best that human beings have ever thought or said. The question is, how far will such wisdom take us? Will it lead us in the way of life everlasting? Will it help us understand why everything matters?”⁹ The answer, the Teacher finally realized, is no.

He wanted to understand the meaning of life, he wanted to get his hands on success, fulfillment, achieving purposes that would make life worth living, but his mistake was made in the very first step. He gave his heart to self: Self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-determination, self-purpose.

The problem is: *You are not made for self.* You were made for God’s purposes. You belong to *Him*. When we divorce ourselves from God’s purposes, then the result is what the Teacher says here. “All my wisdom and exploration was a miserable frustration, a lousy job, a hopeless task.”¹⁰

The other Psalmists may not have been as smart as Solomon, but they understood how to find the fulfillment we all long for:

⁵ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

⁶ David Hubbard *The Communicator’s Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

⁷ Hubbard

⁸ Proverbs 3:13

⁹ Ryken

¹⁰ NAC

Psalm 84:5 - ⁵ Happy are the people whose strength is in [the living God], whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

God made us, He bought us, He loves us, and He has purposes for us to discover and walk in. When we walk with God and fulfill *His* purposes, life is full of fruitful multiplication. When we wander away from God and reduce our lives to “under the sun,” then no matter what we do, in the end it will become frustrated misery. That’s the bottom line of the Teacher’s studies.

Ecclesiastes 1:14 - ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

The Teacher doubles down *again*. It won’t be the last time because he’s run the numbers. He knows we’re *not* going to make it. We sense his exasperation because he knows we don’t want to believe what he’s found. But he looks us in the eyes and says, “I’ve been to the end of the road. Everything you’re trying to do apart from a relationship with God is like trying to shepherd a flock of wind.”¹¹

Ecclesiastes 1:15 - ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

This is the first of two little proverbs the Teacher will share with us tonight. This one points out two harsh realities in life.

“What is crooked cannot be straightened.” Under the sun, some problems will *never* be solved. There will never be a human government totally free from corruption. There will never be a society with total fairness and equality. There will always be deficits and potholes.

“What is lacking cannot be counted.” One of the reasons why we can’t ultimately solve every problem is because we are working with insufficient information.¹² There’s always something we don’t know, something we can’t anticipate, something that defies our human logic.

My favorite example of this proverb is what is called the Cobra Effect. When the British ruled India, they were concerned about the number of venomous cobras in Delhi. So, the government offered a bounty for every dead cobra. That should lead to the eradication of cobras and the problem solved, right? Wrong! What it led to was an explosion of cobra *breeding*. When the government figured out people were breeding cobras, they said, “Ok, we’re not going to pay you anymore.” So then all these cobra ranchers thought, “Well...I don’t want to have a bunch of cobras at my house anymore, they’re dangerous!” And many of them just turned the cobras loose, leading to a great increase in the wild cobra population!¹³ It’s hevel. That’s what the Teacher is talking about.

¹¹ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹² *CSB Study Bible: Notes*

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perverse_incentive

Ecclesiastes 1:16 - ¹⁶ I said to myself, "See, I have amassed wisdom far beyond all those who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has thoroughly grasped wisdom and knowledge."

It's not a brag, this is simply a statement of fact. We're talking about the GOAT when it comes to knowledge and understanding and intelligence.

The Teacher is a very careful researcher. He said, "Ok, here's the problem I want to solve. I'm going to plan, I'm going to assess everything I see, I'm going to evaluate my methods and audit myself." He's not some absent-minded professor. He's fully aware of everything going on and his part in it.

After his initial failure in verses 13-15, he goes *back* to the drawing board and starts again.¹⁴ He's checking his methods and his tools and his calibration to make sure he's getting true results.

Ecclesiastes 1:17 - ¹⁷ I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind.

He started with pursuing earthly wisdom, but the results weren't what he hoped. So, he said, "Let's go all the way to the other end. Since my pursuit of human wisdom left me miserable, maybe I'll find peace and happiness at the *opposite* end in madness and folly." And we'll see all these different avenues along the spectrum he took trying to find what he was looking for.

In his quest for purpose, for fulfillment, to discover the meaning of life, the Teacher was willing to go a lot of places. But where *didn't* he go? He didn't go to prayer, the way Nehemiah did. He didn't go to praise, like David did. He didn't go to God's Word the way the Psalmists did. He went down human avenues - each of which made great promises, but ultimately left the Teacher only level. Trying to shepherd smoke.

Ecclesiastes 1:18 - ¹⁸ For with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases.

Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell wrote, "We have found that the men who know the most are the most gloomy."¹⁵ That comes from a paper they wrote with other scientists and intellectuals in an effort to save the humanity from nuclear war.

Their big "answer" was this line: "Remember your humanity, and forget the rest."

But any 90 second study of humanity, whether through history, sociology, anthropology, or personal experience will show that "answer" is empty. Humanity is defined by selfishness, violence, greed, opportunism, jealousy, stubbornness. Humanity is *obviously* never going to renounce war

¹⁴ Ryken

¹⁵ Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell *The Russell-Einstein Manifesto*

on its own. Humanity not only *must* have laws dictating what is acceptable, but we must have those who *enforce* the laws since there are so many people who do not want to *obey* the laws.

The Teacher was the wisest person to ever live - at least when it comes to wisdom under the sun. But that wisdom is not enough. In fact, *that* wisdom is so inferior it will one day be destroyed.

In 1 Corinthians Paul quotes Isaiah where God says:

1 Corinthians 1:19 - ¹⁹For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.

What we need is something better than wisdom under the sun. So God offers *His* wisdom instead. And in the New Testament we discover that God's wisdom is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:24-25 - ²⁴Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, ²⁵because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

You see, the Teacher is trying to carry a load that is too heavy for him. He's nowhere near strong enough to lift this burden of finding the meaning of life, of ultimate purpose, of true fulfillment. It's too much, it's too heavy, and it's bolted to the bedrock of the earth. All his efforts are like herding cats - shepherding smoke. And he realized it was a meaningless, miserable, hopeless task.

But then God comes along and says, "You don't need to shepherd the wind. Why don't you let *Me* shepherd *you*?" When we are shepherded by God and follow Him, He not only leads us into the purposes He's designed for us but also to contentment and fulfillment - green pastures and still waters. *And*, along the way, *He* straightens what is crooked for us! Check this out:

Psalms 5:8 - ⁸Lord, lead me in your righteousness because of my adversaries; make your way straight before me.

God does what "can't" be done! He does the impossible *on our behalf*.

Hebrews 12 tell us that, as we submit to the Father, our tired hands and weakened knees are strengthened and the paths are *straightened* for our feet.¹⁶ He doesn't weigh us down with misery.

Instead of being a frustrating misery, life becomes full of fruitful multiplication. There are still difficulties, still hardships, still things that don't make total sense to us, but God gives us beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, firmness instead of hevel. Real purpose. Real meaning. Real fulfillment found in Jesus Christ, Who offers us life everlasting, life more abundantly, a life full of holy delight, glory and joy.

¹⁶ Hebrews 12:9-13

I came across a website this week: livinginhawaii.com. This fellow has been living in Hawaii since the 80's and now defines himself by challenging others to go live there, too. His about page says, "I've been living the dream...[are you] ready to live the dream?"

In one eye-catching article titled, "What IS The Meaning Of Life? Fun? God? [Money]?" he wrote:

"I guess I'm on a quest for the meaning of life. I'm 42 and it's time I figured it all out. I'm giving myself until December this year, then I've got to have the answer.

I've said in the past that fun is the entire meaning of life...but having fun most of your life doesn't prepare you for the future at all.

Some people live their lives for God. Whatever god they choose is irrelevant. Gods have nothing to do with the meaning of life except that if they created this world and gave me life then they must have had some idea for human beings in mind. They must have had some sort of point to creating us. They must have had some idea how our time living could be best spent.

What affects me is the nagging question about why I'm going through this life as I am. What is the point of me going through this life?

For myself I've found various meanings of life. Some last me one or two years, some 10. Right now I'm more interested in the ultimate meaning of life - one that might be shared by everyone. Is there such a thing?

The meaning of life is living in Hawaii with family and friends... that's it!"¹⁷

I wonder what someone living through the Lahaina Fires on Maui thinks about that? Or why Hawaii has a higher suicide rate than 26 other states?¹⁸ Or why, on average, 12 people move out of Hawaii every single day?¹⁹ There has to be more than sun and sand.

There is. It's life in Christ. A life offered to anyone anywhere. One we get to experience day by day as we walk with Him.

¹⁷ <https://www.livinginhawaii.com/success/what-is-the-meaning-of-life-fun-god/>

¹⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm>

¹⁹ <https://census.hawaii.gov/main/2023-state-pe/>