

One Life To Leave

Ecclesiastes 2:12-26 August 7, 2024

At the end of the original script of *Planet Of The Apes*, George Taylor says, "We're back at the beginning. I still don't know the why...A world turned wrong side up. A puzzle with one piece missing." Dr. Zaius warns him: "Don't look for it, Taylor. You may not like what you find."¹

A few moments later, George Taylor's world comes crashing down as he discovers the truth. His search for answers ends in desperation and defeat and hopelessness.

Ecclesiastes is a lecture being delivered by a man called Qohelet. It's King Solomon, but he comes to us as a Teacher, sharing his discoveries about the meaning of life.

The problem is, no matter where he tries to find meaning in life, whether in pleasure or power or genius or industry or philanthropy or exhilaration, the result was *always* the same: Hevel. Smoke or vapor that passes through your fingers when you try to grab it.

But, the Teacher keeps trying to find his answer - to find the last piece of the puzzle. Tonight his investigation leads him into a deep and crushing despair. But he *finally* realizes that there is no satisfaction or meaning to life apart from a personal relationship with the sovereign God.

Ecclesiastes 2:12 - ¹²Then I turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly, for what will the king's successor be like? He will do what has already been done.

The first half of chapter 2 lists the mind-blowing experiences and achievements the Teacher had enjoyed during his long life. But after every accomplishment, every party, he still felt empty.

So now he *turns*. And rather than *do* more things, he decides to investigate *why* he can't find what he's looking for. He pops the hood to see which part of the engine isn't working right.

A problem immediately confronts him: *Death*. Despite all his riches, all his power, all his genius, the Teacher is going to die. Someone will take his place and time will march on.

Ecclesiastes 2:13 - ¹³And I realized that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, like the advantage of light over darkness.

Being worldly wise (because *that's* the wisdom the Teacher is talking about) does give some advantages in life. The simple example is, would you rather walk from one room to another in total darkness or with a light on? Light is obviously better. It is *advantageous*.

¹ https://sfy.ru/?script=poa_1968

That's a word, actually a group of words, the Teacher uses throughout this book. They mean advantage, benefit, gain.² He wants to come out ahead in life. He's looking for a profit. And he comes to the rather obvious but no less important discover that human wisdom can be profitable.

Ecclesiastes 2:14 - ¹⁴ The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also knew that one fate comes to them both.

The CSB Study Bible notes: "*The fool may be lazy, quarrelsome, not handle money well, or fall into promiscuity. All these things bring about ruin.*"³ It's better to be wise. *But* human wisdom cannot ultimately save you from death.

Homer Simpson once listened to a presentation about a historical figure. His response was, "If he's so smart, how come he's dead?" Smarts can't keep you out of the grave forever.

But wait, if human wisdom is beneficial, if it helps me achieve all the things the world says make life worth living, then why doesn't it solve the *one most significant problem* that we face?

This bothers the Teacher. The engine of life shouldn't work this way. He pops the hood to see which component needs to be replaced. He grabs the flashlight of wisdom to get a better look only to find the engine is unrepairable. And this drives him into a deep depression. He's been buying all sorts of accessories, machining all kinds of add-on parts, and *none* of it made a difference.

Ecclesiastes 2:15 - ¹⁵ So I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will also happen to me. Why then have I been overly wise?" And I said to myself that this is also futile.

Is he saying it's hevel to be wise? Remember: He's talking about wisdom *under* the sun. Man's intellect. Man's understanding. So far in the book, the Teacher's great mistake has been that he's ignored theology. So, yeah, facing the reality of death, why bother with all those hours of study and discipline? Why carefully plan your decisions? Why delay gratification since that's better in the long run? In the long run, I'll be just as dead.

His studies helped him achieve more than anyone in history. But all the wisdom in the world cannot guarantee you a long and happy life. Because this world is plagued by time, death, and chance.

Here's an example of why the Teacher is upset: If you smoke cigarettes, statistically speaking you have a 15-30x higher chance of developing lung cancer.⁴ *But*, every year, 30,000 people who have *never* smoked also get lung cancer.⁵ So the wisdom of how to have healthier lungs is *profitable*, but it's not a *guarantee*. To the Teacher that seems wrong and unfair. He's saying, "I did the right thing. I did the smart thing. Why am I still subject to death?" He's ignoring the theological.

² *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

³ *CSB Study Bible: Notes*

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/lung-cancer/risk-factors/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/lung-cancer/nonsmokers/index.html>

I saw a National Geographic Kids article today that said, "Scientists believe in the next few decades it will be possible for humans to live 1,000 years or more."⁶ They ignore the theological.

The Teacher realizes, "Oh, worldly wisdom doesn't ultimately answer my questions." But, he's got a problem, because he already knows that foolishness leaves him even *more* empty.

Ecclesiastes 2:16 - ¹⁶ For, just like the fool, there is no lasting remembrance of the wise, since in the days to come both will be forgotten. How is it that the wise person dies just like the fool?

If he can't live forever, at least the memory of his greatness should live forever, right? But no. Whether he's the best or just average or a failure, give it enough time and it won't matter at all.

This leads the Teacher to what Douglas Miller calls an "emotional crescendo" of frustration.⁷ Like Charlton Heston at the end of *Planet Of The Apes*, beating the sand in anger and defeat.

Ecclesiastes 2:17 - ¹⁷ Therefore, I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me. For everything is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

Remember who's talking. The richest man in the world. The most powerful man in the world. The smartest man in the world. A man who did anything and everything he wanted to the extreme with no one slowing him down. He *hated* life because he was still empty in his soul.

But again we see that hint - that qualifier: what was done *under the sun*. Where is God? Where is eternity? The Teacher hasn't stopped to consider that satisfaction might be found beyond himself.

Because he has limited life to self, to his lifespan, he has *no* peace. In fact, life was *terrible* to him.⁸

Ecclesiastes 2:18 - ¹⁸ I hated all my work that I labored at under the sun because I must leave it to the one who comes after me.

As the Teacher shares his complaints with us from here till verse 23, notice how self-focused he is. Try to tally how many times he says "I," "me," or "my."

He's incensed that his wealth is going to be left as an inheritance to someone else. Aren't you happy for him? No. No he wasn't. That's *mine*. It's for *me*. What matters is *my* satisfaction. This is another "intense expression" of emotion.⁹ The Teacher is angry and despondent at his discoveries.

Ecclesiastes 2:19 - ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will take over all my work that I labored at skillfully under the sun. This too is futile.

⁶ <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/books/article/could-humans-live-forever>

⁷ Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

⁸ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

⁹ Ronald Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23: Ecclesiastes*

He's not wrong. After Solomon's death, the crown passed to his son, Rehoboam. And Rehoboam destroyed Solomon's glorious, unified kingdom with *one* foolish decision.

The Teacher's attitude is, "*I* deserve better. *I* deserve eternal life, or at least an eternal appreciation for my greatness."

He thinks that because he doesn't have a proper theology yet. The work you labored at? I think you mean the thousands of slaves who you forced into that labor. I wonder what they thought of you? Or the women you objectified and took advantage of in your excessive pursuit of pleasure? But the Teacher has a self-centered, secular mindset. "I shouldn't die." But that's not how this world works.

Ecclesiastes 2:20 - ²⁰ So I began to give myself over to despair concerning all my work that I had labored at under the sun.

We should take a moment and consider the bombshell that is revealed here. Solomon did more than anyone to ever live. But the scope of his achievement wasn't big enough. It was still *under the sun* and therefore subject to time, death, and chance, which equalizes everyone.

The Teacher's despair is getting worse. There where I read "I began to give myself," your version may say "I turned my heart." This is the second turning of the night. The room is spinning now as he realizes all his pursuits were, ultimately, for nothing. They were all for *him*, so they won't last.

Ecclesiastes 2:21 - ²¹ When there is a person whose work was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and he must give his portion to a person who has not worked for it, this too is futile and a great wrong.

You can hear him seething at this perceived unfairness. But once again he exempts himself. He did not *found* the nation of Israel. He received the throne from a king who came before *him*.

The real problem is not that his successor might be a fool or that someone who worked less hard might live longer than him. The real problem is that he doesn't know what to do about death. And *that* is the one question a person needs to answer.

Ecclesiastes 2:22 - ²² For what does a person get with all his work and all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?

Well, Solomon, you got quite a lot. A life of fame and wealth and ease and enjoyment. You were the richest, most powerful, most celebrated person on planet earth. But it wasn't enough. He heart was still empty. He wanted more. He wanted to be appreciated forever, worshiped for his greatness.

Jesus spoke to this mindset in Matthew chapter 6. He said, "Ok, if you want to live so people can see what you're doing and be impressed by you and give you accolades, fine. You *have* your

reward.”¹⁰ Elsewhere He said, “You can gain the whole world (like the Teacher had), but you can lose your soul, lose your life in the process.”¹¹ Real satisfaction can’t be found under the sun.

We’ve *got* to get out from under it. We’ve got to lay hold of the eternal.

Ecclesiastes 2:23 - ²³ For all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful; even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile.

By now, the Teacher wasn’t even able to sleep in his palace. He’s literally the most comfortable person in the whole world at the time, but he has no rest, no peace. He spent a lifetime storing up treasures on earth only to realize he was going to lose it all when death came knocking.

Proper theology solves this problem. Because proper theology - and by that I mean a living faith in the God of the Bible - saves us from the grave, grants us everlasting life, and gives us a place where we can build and invest and store up where rust does not destroy and thieves cannot steal.

Finally, the Teacher stops to consider the theological in the last three verses of the chapter.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 - ²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God’s hand, ²⁵ because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him

Is the Teacher suddenly contradicting himself? We have to understand the differences in terms. On the one hand, you have the life he made for himself. The human achievements. The human pursuits. The human goals. Now he’s talking about life as something God gives to us as a gift.

Before he was talking about human wisdom and knowledge and ingenuity. Now he’s going to talk about *God’s* wisdom, which is of a much different character and bears much different fruit.

As the Teacher considers his questions and investigates his problem, he is inevitably brought face-to-face with the revelation of God. Now, in the unfolding of this lecture, the Teacher does not yet have a personal relationship with the Lord. In fact, he never specifically calls God by His name. He’s using the more impersonal title here.¹² But as the Teacher seeks for answers, in his despair, the Lord reveals Himself. And the Teacher comes to understand that life cannot be filled and satisfied or have real meaning without a relationship with the God Who gave you life.

God *does* want you to enjoy the life He’s given you. He is a tender gift giver. Look at the picture here: Life was not found in God’s storehouse, or in God’s quarry, or in God’s reservoir. It’s not in some place where you have to find on the map, make your way to, and draw out yourself. No, *this* God hand-delivers His gifts to us. That indicates closeness and kindness and personal knowledge.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:2

¹¹ Mark 8:36

¹² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

We learn quite a few things theologically in these closing verses. One is that God's desire is for you to enjoy real satisfaction in your life. Obviously that doesn't mean we won't get hurt or have sorrow. But life is a gift and God wants you to enjoy it. Even the basic pleasures¹³ of a delicious meal. One translation says there's nothing better than for us to sate ourselves on the gifts of God.¹⁴

In fact, six times in this book, the Teacher is going to come to the conclusion that we should *enjoy* the life God has given us. Even in the frustrations, even in the hardships. God intends there to be joy and real satisfaction even when our lives are touched by time, death, and chance.

Ecclesiastes 2:26 - ²⁶ For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

One commentator writes, "[The Teacher] is beginning to see the difference it makes to live with God instead of without him."¹⁵

He's sharing more theological truths. One is the sovereignty of God whether you obey Him or not. Duane Garrett says, "God uses the lives of the wicked to achieve His own purposes."¹⁶

We also learn we can *please* God. Now, the Teacher doesn't know how to do that yet, but we do. We please God by seeking Him and exercising faith in Him and walking in the Spirit.¹⁷

We also see an essential difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. The Teacher had more of the world's wisdom than anyone ever and he told us, "with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases."¹⁸ We saw that sorrow and grief tonight.

But *God's* wisdom does not bring grief, it brings *joy*. God's wisdom is treasure!¹⁹ It cultivates peace in our lives.²⁰ It sanctifies and redeems. It breaks us out from under the sun.

And we also learn that God's intention is not only to gift us with life, but to give us an inheritance. What a gracious King He is. Solomon was throwing a tantrum a few verses ago that his successor would get an inheritance from him. Not the Lord. He is ready to share all He has with those who are willing to humble themselves and lose their lives to Him so that He can save them.

¹³ *CSB Study Bible: Notes*

¹⁴ Alter

¹⁵ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

¹⁶ Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

¹⁷ Hebrews 11:6, Romans 8:8-9

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes 1:18

¹⁹ Colossians 2:3

²⁰ James 3:18

These theological truths solve all the problems the Teacher is lamenting in these verses. Now, work isn't meaningless, it's valuable. Now life isn't a struggle, it's a sanctified gift from God. Now all you work for isn't lost when you're buried, instead you have eternal rewards waiting for you in heaven. Now, death is not a looming nemesis. In fact, death has no sting or victory.

But we have to think theologically. We have to acknowledge the Creator of Life, the Giver of Life, and understand that He's the only One Who knows how to run a life. We don't. When we take His outstretched hand and commune with Him, the meaning of life clicks into place, and peace, joy, and satisfaction come with it.