



What's the Use?

The wise person seeks to find meaning in life from God.

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-15; 2:18-26

People throughout history have tried to take their wealth with them when they died. Items placed around mummies and in caskets point to that effort. The great equalizer in life is death, regardless of how much or how little one accumulates. The writer of Ecclesiastes observed that people who focus solely on work and amassing material possessions come to the end of life without any eternal gains to show for it.

In what activities do people engage in their pursuit to find meaning in life?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 1:1–2:26

The Book of Ecclesiastes consists of “the words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The only king who was a descendant of David and ruled in Jerusalem over all of Israel was Solomon. Verses 2-3 indicate the theme of the book. In Hebrew, the word translated “futility” means “vapor” or “breath.” From this the word came to mean “temporary,” “fleeting,” “futile,” “inconsequential,” or even “absurd.” The phrase, “under the sun,” was Solomon’s way of referring to life on earth. It is here the Teacher asked the often repeated key question of the book: “What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?” The answer is futility.

The generations of humanity come and go, but they, along with their achievements, are forgotten. While there are human inventions, reconstructions, and novel ideas, nothing is able to add any lasting meaning or value to what God already has created. Humanity can add nothing intrinsically new to what He has done. Therefore, the search for meaning in life will not come through something as transitory as human achievement (1:3-11).

With this in mind, the Teacher delved into numerous pursuits he undertook in the search for life’s meaning. He tried education and intellectual endeavors but discovered that trying to understand the meaning of life is too perplexing for even the most educated and greatest of human intellects. In the end, it is a bewildering puzzle (1:12-18). Solomon found that even the wisdom one may gain in life is of no real ultimate value. In the end, both the wise and foolish share the same fate—death (2:12-17).

Next, he turned his attention to pleasure and the accumulation of possessions. He discovered these “delights of men” were in the end a disappointment (2:8). Moreover, when one dies, it is likely that those who inherit these possessions will squander them, so all the work was for nothing. It is best to go through life being content with what one has (2:18-26). All of this indicates the answer to life’s meaning is outside of human achievement. It should lead humanity to look to God who provides the answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?” The answer is in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-15 and 2:18-26, highlighting words or phrases that express frustration. How does the futility of human achievements reveal one's need for God?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

LIMITED PERSPECTIVE (ECCL. 1:12-15)

¹² I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

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. 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. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

VERSES 12-15

As already noted, the writer indicated he was a “son of David” and had been **king over Israel in Jerusalem** (1:1,12). This points to Solomon. As king, Solomon was known for his great wealth and building projects, which included the temple and his palace in Jerusalem. Solomon was also renowned for his wisdom. He had both the means and the mind to provide a unique, insightful perspective on life. It is best to think of Ecclesiastes as Solomon’s musings and reflections on what he had learned in life now that he was approaching its end.

The phrase **I applied my mind** is literally “I set my heart.” This idiom represents one’s thinking, will, and devotion. The Teacher indicated he determined to devote his whole self—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—to this task. To **examine** means to get to the root of the matter, and **explore** means to thoroughly investigate the matter from a variety of approaches. The Teacher was analytical, meticulous, and thorough in his pursuit of understanding the meaning and significance of life.

The Teacher discovered that his endeavor was a **miserable task**. Why? Because he discovered that, in contrast to the widely held belief

that knowledge leads to satisfaction in life, the pursuit of knowledge fails to give lasting fulfillment. It is a never-ending quest and a hopeless task. It will always be fruitless until one realizes God is the Source of wisdom as well as the Goal of wisdom. True wisdom comes from God and always leads to God. Therefore, the wisdom of man will never satisfy. Because we were created in the image of God, we sense there is something beyond us, and so we search. However, it is a miserable task when we look to ourselves and fail to look to God for the solution.

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible dictionary to gain insight into a word.*

Read the entry about “vain,” “vanity,” or “futility” in a Bible dictionary. Examine some of the Bible passages included. How does the way vain or vanity is used outside of Ecclesiastes give you deeper insight into the emotions expressed by Solomon? What modern words might you use to convey what Solomon meant when he used the word translated as vanity or futility?

The Teacher indicated he saw the various things people busy themselves with and concluded that, apart from God, humanity is doomed to a life of frustration. The pursuits of accomplishment, satisfaction, and progress end in futility. In the context, this conclusion is especially true concerning intellectual pursuits. It is like chasing the wind. One can never catch it, but even if one could, it would amount to nothing. Since the fall, when Adam and Eve sinned, all of humanity has been subjected to these futile pursuits, and our only hope is in God’s salvation. (See Rom. 8:20-21.)

Solomon concluded this section with a proverb: ***What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.*** The first part means that problems—what is *crooked*—cannot be solved. The second part means that there is no end to a lack of information. In other words, there is not enough data to solve the problem.

Intellectuals and the most educated should recognize this truth. There are anomalies in life that one cannot comprehend, and this is especially true when it comes to the most important issues in life. No matter how impressed humanity may be with its own intellectual prowess, it fades away before the inscrutableness of God.

**What motivates a person to find meaning and purpose?
How does that motivation work for and against a person?**

INHERITANCE BLOWN? (ECCL. 2:18-21)

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

VERSES 18-21

The Teacher has deliberated on the failures of physical pleasures and luxuries to bring meaningful satisfaction in life. He revisited the futility of attempting to achieve immortality by accumulating human wisdom or accomplishing great feats (2:1-17). Now he turned his attention to the question, “What will happen to all my wealth and accomplishments when I die?” In the preceding verses he acknowledged that everyone will die. Now, he considered what happens after that. He was appalled when he recognized the truth that someday he would die and lose everything he had worked to attain. He realized everything he had accomplished by his hard work would go to someone else.

This is what happens when one views work as a means of self-gratification. For such individuals, their work literally ends up at a dead end. One of Solomon’s proverbs, Proverbs 16:3, states: “Commit your activities to the LORD, and your plans will be established.” The Hebrew word translated *activities* refers to all the various things

people set out to accomplish in life, including their work. The Hebrew word translated *established* means “to be made stable, durable, and lasting.” The promise of this proverb stands in stark contrast to what happens to those who live and work for themselves instead of for the Lord. Their accomplishments are temporary and ultimately meaningless. When people commit their activities to the Lord, not only do they honor Him but they store up for themselves eternal “treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:20).

To make matters worse, the Teacher considered who might inherit everything he had accumulated. It occurred to him that all his hard work and all he had attained would come to nothing. His children may squander it. Though Solomon made no direct reference to his son, Rehoboam became an apt illustration of Solomon’s point (1 Kings 11:41–12:24). With time, legacies will be forgotten and others will spend what they have inherited in whatever ways they choose. Concerning one’s labor, it is best to heed Paul’s instruction to the believers in Colossae concerning work: “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23-24).

Why are people prone to focus solely on work and the amassing of material possessions in their lives without any regard for God?

After all his investigation into the human pursuit for meaning and satisfaction in life, the Teacher became disillusioned with it all. He experienced human wisdom and pleasure and discovered they had nothing meaningful and lasting to offer. Every human attainment will be forgotten, lost, and passed on to someone else. The person who lives by the philosophy, “He who dies with the most toys wins,” will ultimately have lived for nothing. Therefore, the Teacher no longer would be deluded by the notion that hard work and the accumulation of wealth validates one’s life. There is more to life than that.

The Teacher then determined that not only is working hard and accumulating possessions a futile task, but it is also an injustice. One can spend a lifetime working to think properly concerning

an endeavor, learn all the pertinent information, develop the expert skills needed to be successful, then lose everything to someone else who did nothing to earn it. The Teacher found this all quite disturbing.

ENJOY WORK (ECCL. 2:22-26)

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

VERSES 22-23

The Teacher returned to the key question of the book first raised in the introduction (1:3). This fundamental question appears several times in the book (1:3; 2:22; 3:9; 5:16; 6:8,11). All the content in the book is connected to this question. For this reason, the reader should keep this question in mind while reading the entire Book of Ecclesiastes. The question asks, “When people die, is there any lasting value or eternal significance to all the mental stress and strenuous work that consumed their lives, and how will these pursuits help people beyond the grave?” This lays the groundwork for the counsel the Teacher would dispense in verse 24 and following.

Not only does all this work and worry offer no eternal value in the afterlife, but it is also a life filled with grief, sorrow, and anxious unrest every hour of every day and night. It describes a life of misery, adversity, and worry—consisting of stressful days and sleepless nights. Such is the plight of the workaholic whose life is consumed with work, thinking this is what life is all about. It is physically and emotionally draining and devoid of any eternal significance.

What are the dangers of basing our worth solely on the job or type of work we do?

VERSES 24-26

Verses 24-26 mark the climax of the first section of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Teacher concluded that work and the fruit of one's labor should be enjoyed as one recognizes they are gifts from God. Work originates with God, as He is a God who works. The creation account indicates God was pleased with His work of creation and blessed the man by placing him in the garden to work (Gen. 1:31–2:3,15). God established a pattern of working six days and resting on the seventh (Ex. 20:8-11). The ability to work and enjoy its fruit are gifts from God. However they are neither a means to nor the attainment of lasting value. It is not the gifts but the Giver who gives them significance. Speaking of God, the Teacher asked, "Who can enjoy life apart from Him?" The answer is no one.

The wise person lives a life devoted to God and thus experiences the joy of knowing God and living life as God intends it to be lived. In contrast, the foolish who live for themselves forfeit everything. All their striving in life is for nothing. Thus, it is the people of God who ultimately inherit all things. The Teacher recognized God's sovereignty to be both gracious and just at the same time. As the great King over the whole earth, God has sovereign authority to choose an eternal inheritance for those who belong to Him.

Why should those who belong to God enjoy life more than anyone else?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Stewardship*

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him (2 Cor. 9:8).

APPLY THE TEXT

- We need God’s gift of wisdom to find life’s true purpose.
- Focusing solely on work and amassing material possessions leads to no eternal gains.
- Believers should enjoy their work, thanking God for His provisions.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your dependence on God for your life’s purpose? What adjustments need to be made to increase your dependence on Him?

Review your schedule, noting the amount of time spent on work versus other activities. What does your schedule reveal about your attitude toward work and the value of work? How does your attitude coincide with what Solomon taught?

As a group, memorize Ecclesiastes 2:26. In your discussion, consider how work and being blessed with the ability to work are gifts from God. How can you use your work to honor God?

PRAYER NEEDS
