



Unit .12

Session .02

A Son Learns True Wisdom

Scripture



Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:1-11

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. **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.” **17** I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind. **18** For with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases. ... **1** I said to myself, “Go ahead, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy what is good.” But it turned out to be futile. **2** I said about laughter, “It is madness,” and about pleasure, “What does this accomplish?” **3** I explored with my mind the pull of wine on my body—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to grasp folly, until I could see what is good for people to do under

heaven during the few days of their lives. **4** I increased my achievements. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. **5** I made gardens and parks for myself and planted every kind of fruit tree in them. **6** I constructed reservoirs for myself from which to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees. **7** I acquired male and female servants and had slaves who were born in my house. I also owned livestock—large herds and flocks—more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. **8** I also amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I gathered male and female singers for myself, and many concubines, the delights of men. **9** So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; my wisdom also remained with me. **10** All that my eyes desired, I did not deny them. I did not refuse myself any pleasure, for I took pleasure in all my struggles. This was my reward for all my struggles. **11** When I considered all that I had accomplished and what I had labored to achieve, I found everything to be futile and a pursuit of the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Intro Options



Main Point:
Because God exists,
life has meaning
and purpose.

Option 1

Tell your students that they've been selected to help with the YouTube and Instagram Dictionaries. These (fictional) dictionaries are projects put on by each platform to "define" words in their given medium. Your group has been assigned the word futility. Your students should form small groups (or work as individuals, if they want). They then have to make either a skit (for a YouTube video) or a picture (for Instagram) "defining" futility.

Given them some time to prep their skits or videos, then have them share. Use their "definitions" as a discussion-starting point to introduce futility, Ecclesiastes's major theme.

Option 2

Ask your students to imagine they are waiting in line at a crowded train station. A few of them are pressed against the wall. As the line moves, they rub the wall, and a genie suddenly pops out of the wall! They've inadvertently discovered a rare form of genie: the wall genie. Wall genies can grant you one wish, but you have to choose your wish from three options that the genie presents.


This particular genie gives the same three options to each of your students: tremendous wisdom; tremendous pleasure; or abundant possessions. Which would each of your students choose, and why? Once each student has given his or her answer, ask them what they think they will be doing ten years after the fulfillment of this wish. Will they be happy?

Explain that it's a bit of a trick question: Solomon received all three "wishes" in his role as king, and he found all of them to be lacking apart from God, as we'll see in Ecclesiastes.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.



In Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, Solomon presented the thesis for the book: Absolute futility. Everything is futile. The word translated “futility” is rendered variously as “meaningless” or “vanity” in other translations. The Hebrew word comes from the word for breath or breathing. But tucked away in the midst of the angst and despair, we find a sliver of hope. Notice where Solomon was looking for wisdom. There is a subtle but important difference between the phrase “under heaven” in verse 13 and “under the sun” in verse 14. “Under heaven” refers to viewing life through the Christian lens as centering on God and being under God’s sovereign rule, and the phrase “under the sun” refers to viewing life without God being at the center. Significantly, when Solomon describes something done “under heaven,” we don’t see the word “hevel” (“futility”) anywhere near it. But when something is done “under the sun,” hevel is often in the same phrase. Verse 14 even kicks up the sense of futility another notch: not only is everything a mist or a vapor, it is a “chasing after the wind.” 

The picture Solomon paints here is reality if we push God out of our lives. But when God is at the center of our lives as our King and treasure, all of life is filled with meaning and purpose. All that we do matters. If Jesus is who He said He was, and if He truly is raised from the dead and reigning over all things, then everything we do matters. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote 1 Corinthians 15:58. Without Him, everything we do is in vain. With Him, everything we do has meaning, value, and purpose.

▪ **Where does your focus tend to be more often: “under heaven” or “under the sun?”**

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-3.



Ecclesiastes 1:12-5:20 can be read like an extended life experiment for Solomon as he searched for meaning through various pursuits—intelligence, indulgence, working hard, materialism, etc—and time and time again (2:19,21,23,26; 4:4,8,16; 5:10) Solomon reached the same conclusion that apart from God, these things are meaningless.

But what about laughter and pleasure? Why do pleasure and laughter fail to satisfy us? Does God disapprove of pleasure? Does He frown on smiling? Not at all. In fact, Solomon himself wrote about some of the great benefits of having a joyful heart (Prov. 15:13). The problem for Solomon, and for many people today, is that he viewed pleasure and laughter as ends in themselves. But in Scripture, laughter and cheer are always intended to lead us back to God, the Author of joy.

God is not just permissive of our enjoyment; He is for our enjoyment. But true enjoyment will always be sourced in God alone—who He is and what He has done. Without union with God as the source of pleasure and glorifying Him as the goal of pleasure, we are left asking ourselves the same question Solomon asked in verse 2: “What does this accomplish?” And like Solomon, we too will discover the answer: nothing. Momentary pleasure detached from an eternal God accomplishes just that: momentary pleasure. Then it is gone and we are left with a void in our hearts that leads us to seek out more momentary pleasure to fill it, and on and on it goes. But when we turn to God for pleasure, we will not only find it, but we will find that it lasts because it is based on an unchanging, eternal, good God.

COMMENTARY

Ecclesiastes 1

Main Point:
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12. While Solomon is not explicitly named as the author of Ecclesiastes, the first verse of the book identifies the author as the “Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem,” repeated here in verse 12. Since Ecclesiastes 12:9 speaks of the author as a writer of proverbs, the internal evidence points to Solomon as the author. Additionally, the accounts of superlative wisdom (1:16), great building projects (2:4-5), and vast wealth (2:8-9) all correspond to descriptions of Solomon in 1 Kings 4:29-31; 9:15-19; 10:14-23.

12-18. When Solomon wrote that he had “amassed wisdom far beyond” anyone else, he wasn’t kidding. First Kings 4:30-33 records that he wrote three thousand proverbs. To put this in perspective, the thirty-one chapters of the Book of Proverbs contain about nine hundred of them. If we had all three thousand of Solomon’s proverbs, Proverbs would be the longest book in the Bible. So imagine Solomon’s existential angst: if you knew you were the wisest man who had ever lived, and yet you also knew you didn’t have all the answers, where would you go from there?

How did Solomon get to this point? Though there are references to God sprinkled throughout Ecclesiastes, only rarely does Solomon speak of fearing God or showing reverence for Him (5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13), and never once does he praise or rejoice in Him. This seems so different from the inexperienced king who acknowledged God as the giver of wisdom in 1 Kings 3 or the king who prayed the stirring prayer of dedication when the temple was completed (1 Kings 8:22-53). What happened?

That sad tale is told in 1 Kings 11, when Solomon was seduced to follow other gods by his many wives. He had seven hundred wives who were princesses (11:3) and apparently, he built an altar for each one of their pagan gods (11:8). Though Solomon’s wisdom never left him, his focused faith did. In Solomon we see that wisdom apart from faith always flounders. It always disappoints. It always frustrates. It always leaves us wanting more. The reason is simple: because true wisdom, what Solomon would discover, is made for more than the things of this world. It is made to draw us to the One over this world, the One who created this world. Wisdom is designed to draw us to deeper faith in Christ, and when we remove Him from the equation, wisdom turns into folly.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 88, DDG)

Illumination of Scripture

Because of the vast difference between God’s wisdom and ours and because of humanity’s sinful state, human beings are incapable, on our own, of fully grasping spiritual truth without being aided by the Holy Spirit through the process of illumination. When it comes to understanding the meaning of God’s Word, Christians do not rely ultimately upon human reason in the process of interpretation, nor do we rely solely upon an institution or body of scholars. Instead, a Christian’s ultimate reliance is upon the work of the Spirit of God, who illuminates the Scriptures in the heart and mind (John 14:15-18; 16:7-15).



TEACHING PLAN

▪ How can we better find our joy in God instead of the things of the world?

Having concluded that laughter and pleasure do not ultimately satisfy, Solomon moved to the next item on his “wisdom quest” bucket list: alcohol. Solomon’s conclusion about pleasure in verse 1 applies to his experiment with alcohol as well: if the feeling of alcohol is the end in itself, it is futile. Once again, what we pursued for pleasure, what we thought would satisfy our hearts, may give that appearance for a moment. But in the end, it will let us down. It always does because it was not designed to provide that which we seek.

▪ In what ways do people often try to create their own path to joy and meaning? Why do these eventually fail to deliver in the end?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-11.



▪ Where do you typically look for fulfillment? How has that changed over the years?

Solomon’s catalog of excess in verses 4-11 is staggering. But as mind-bending as all this is, here is something that is arguably even more staggering: Go back through verses 4-11 and highlight every use of “I,” “me,” “my,” or “myself.” All of Solomon’s accomplishments, all Solomon’s achievements, all Solomon’s acquisitions had a singular focus: Solomon. Solomon was in the pursuit of Solomon.

In our culture today, Solomon should have been the happiest man to ever live. But he wasn’t. The houses and vineyards didn’t satisfy him. The gardens and parks didn’t. Neither did the reservoirs, public works, servants, livestock, silver, gold, or personal choir. And the concubines certainly didn’t—as we know, that is what led to his downfall. Like pleasure and wine, possessions proved to also line the path toward futility.

▪ What do you think seems most unbelievable about Christianity to non-Christians? Why?

Centuries after Solomon, one of his descendants would show the world a different path to fulfillment—one that had nothing to do with accumulation of possessions. That descendant was, of course, Jesus. Although He is the King of kings and the Creator of all, Jesus was born in a stable (Luke 2). The owner of the cattle on a thousand hills didn’t have a place to lay his head (Luke 9:58) because that is what He chose. He had no servants, but instead washed the feet of His friends (John 13) as a servant. When He died, the only material possession He had to His name was a seamless coat, which Roman soldiers gambled for (John 19:23-24) and a crown of thorns that was given to Him by those same soldiers. When He was buried, it was in a borrowed tomb because He didn’t even have a grave of His own (Luke 23:50-56). According to Philippians 2, He made Himself nothing and took on the form of a servant.

Yet Jesus didn’t just have happiness; He had real joy, even in the face of the cross (Heb. 12:2). Jesus did not seek fulfillment through “filling up” on stuff. He was fulfilled by emptying Himself, taking on the likeness of humanity, and becoming obedient to the Father (Phil. 2:5-8).



COMMENTARY

Main Point:
Because God exists,
life has meaning
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Ecclesiastes 2

4-11. Perhaps the fact that Solomon's wisdom remained with him is more of a statement about God's faithfulness than Solomon's restraint. In the previous session, we saw how Solomon prayed for wisdom at the beginning of his reign (1 Kings 3:9). God was pleased with his request, and He granted it. Does God ever take back a gift? As we pore over the Scriptures, we can find examples of God doing just that. For example, Samson's supernatural strength left him in Judges 16, and God took the kingdom away from Saul in 1 Samuel 15:28. God will always act according to what brings Him glory. God promised David in 2 Samuel 7:15 that His faithful love would never leave Solomon as it did when God removed it from Saul. Thus, if Solomon's wisdom remained with him, it was because God chose for it to remain with him, not because Solomon exercised moderation. God is omniscient, and He works all things according to His perfect knowledge, for His glory and our good.

Activity

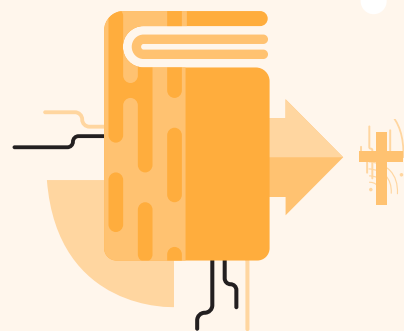
Break your students into pairs or trios. Each pair or trio is to pick a famous person. This person can be fictional or real, from today or from the past, celebrity or athlete: as long as it's a notable person whom most folks would recognize, anybody is fair game. Luke Skywalker, Barbie, LeBron James, Chef Boyardee, Katy Perry, or Margaret Thatcher are all fine examples.

One of the people in each pair/trio should pretend to be the famous person. At least one of the other people in the group should now pretend to be (a time-traveling) King Solomon and try to minister to that famous person using Ecclesiastes, or the principles from it. For example, if the group is ministering to a rich person, they will want to try to explain that riches will not ultimately fulfill in the way Jesus will; if the group is ministering to Harry Potter, they'll want to explain that all the spells and friends in the world won't bring him real fulfillment like Jesus can.

Have the students role-play their conversations in front of one another. Use their conversations as a debriefing point to discuss what's helpful in sharing with others and what approaches might be better left untried.

(p. 90, DDG) Christ Connection

Wisdom is the skill of living faithfully in God's world, but all of us have sinned. Wisdom shows us how to live but cannot save us. For this reason, Jesus became God-given wisdom for us (1 Cor. 1:30) so that through His death and resurrection (which appear foolish to the world), we might be saved according to the wise plan of God.



Our Mission

God's Story has always been designed to connect with our story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own. Suggested answers to these questions can be found on the right-hand side of the page for leaders.

Head



What are some things you turn to for meaning and purpose? Why do these fail?

How would you explain to a friend that Jesus is better than all these things?

Heart



How should your relationship with Christ affect the way you view all of life's activities?

How should our relationship with Christ motivate us to be on mission for Him?

Hands



What are some way you can pursue wisdom this week?

If all of life is meaningless apart from Jesus, who are you going to tell that to this week?

Main Point: **Because God exists, life has meaning and purpose.**



Head

Paul's letter to the Colossians reminds us not to look to anything besides Christ for ultimate meaning and purpose (Col. 2:8-10). Only in Christ does the fullness of God dwell. Only through Christ do idols and so-called gods lose their power and appeal. Only in Christ do we discover why we are here. We discover that what we've been searching for in pleasure, approval, power, and comfort is actually found in Him. He is better and He is enough.

Jesus really is better. He speaks a better word. He tells a better story. He offers a better answer to why we are here. Let us give our lives to helping the world know and trust this God who made us for Himself, and who alone provides the answer to why we are here!



Heart

What are we on earth for? Attempts to answer that question are at every turn. This text reminds us that countless opinions are offered up regarding this issue. Think of all the different philosophies and perspectives on life and why we are here. Talk shows, magazines, blogs, and websites bombard us with advice and counsel on how to live. But unless they conclude that we were made for God and His commands, they are wrong and should be rejected. Deep down, all humans know that they were made for God.

As Christians, we have a tremendous opportunity to offer hope to our world. We know why we are here! We know why we were put on this earth. We know the path to ultimate meaning and purpose. We have a living Savior who came to give us abundant life and overflowing joy (John 10:10; 15:11). We don't simply offer the world ideas, information, or a philosophy. We offer the world a Person—a Person who died and rose again. We offer living hope, living water, and living bread in a reigning King named Jesus.



Hands

Solomon's repeated refrain in the Book of Ecclesiastes is that everything under the sun is meaningless. And he was right; he still is. To pursue that which is "under the sun" is to chase after a life apart from God. But as believers, we aren't called to live under the sun. This is true wisdom. It is understanding that we cannot find meaning in anything apart from God. But when we do find meaning in Him, it shapes how we live each day, pursuing Him and His glory, instead of our own passing pleasures. True wisdom is found in knowing Christ and living for Him. This is what we learn from Solomon.

But there's one more part of living out true wisdom. We are not called to pursue living in wisdom in isolation. We have been called to bring others with us—to help our fellow aliens on this planet find the joy of life eternal: life above the sun.