

Ecclesiastes: Life Under the Sun

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Before we get started, I want you to imagine with me for a moment. Tomorrow you go through your normal day, and at some point, you check in with your bank and check your bank statement. When you check it, your heart almost stops. You start sweating bullets, your heart speeds up, and you start getting excited, but you panic at the same time. What you see in your bank account is ten billion dollars! Imagine that...you see ten billion dollars, and you are used to maybe thirty-five dollars. So you really don't know what to do. You call your spouse, your parents, or someone. Of course, you realize it is a mistake so you call the bank. They log in to your account and they, too, are a little bit disturbed and panic. They say they will call you right back and hang up the phone. You think it was a great dream for a little bit. Five minutes later, the phone rings and you pick it up. The bank tells you they don't really know what is going on, but someone made an anonymous donation into your account last night. All of the money is yours, enjoy; and they hang up the phone. How would that change your life? Just think about that for a minute...how would that change your life? What would you do? What could you pay off? What have you been putting off that you can now do? What are you now dreaming about that you have never dreamed before? You could do everything; what you can do is unlimited! If that happened to you, would you be a little

happier? You think your marriage would be fixed, your retirement would be done; everything would be great! Ten billion dollars; this is awesome!!

Jesus asked a similar question in the gospels. Jesus said, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world...?" What would it profit you if you gained the whole world? Ten billion dollars would be like gaining the whole world. But what profit would that really have? What would happen if we got everything we ever really wanted?

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are going to see Solomon raising a very similar question. Solomon asked in chapter 1:3, "*What does man gain by all of the toil at which he toils under the sun.*" What is profitable, what is leftover? The thought is what really satisfies? To have profit or gain is something that is leftover, something that satisfies, and something that actually makes you happy. With all the work that we do, what does it really gain us in the end? That is what the whole book of Ecclesiastes is dealing with. He asks that question and then seeks to answer it. His answer is not very good. Chapter 1, verse 2 says, "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*" When asking if you would truly be satisfied if you gained the whole world, Solomon answers absolutely not. If you gained the whole world, it would all be vanity. The word, *vanity*, means 'emptiness, nothingness.' One writer said the word is like what is leftover when you pop a soap bubble; it is just a film. When you grab life by the horns, pursue everything, and get everything you have ever dreamed of, your life would be completely empty at the end of it, apart from having a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. That really is what this book is all about.

Many of you might not understand this book because it sounds kind of heretical. It sounds unorthodox. Is it really true that we are no different from animals; we all just die and that is the end? That is what Solomon says. Is it really true that we are just to eat, drink, and be merry because that is all life is about? Are we supposed to just go and get pleasure and not think about it? Is it really true that the good die young, therefore don't be overly good, but be wicked so you will live longer? These are some of the things Solomon instructs us to do from the book of Ecclesiastes! What in the world is going on in this book? What is Solomon doing?

Life Under the Sun

I would like to share my perspective with you. As you know, Solomon had a period in his life where he ran away from God. He chased after women and they led him to all kinds of false gods. He married for political reasons, he went after gain and money; he chased life apart from God. So Solomon assembles all the people together to preach his life story. By the way, the word, *Ecclesiastes*, means 'a gathering, an assembly.' As an older man now, Solomon (the Preacher) shares his pursuits of pleasure apart from a relationship with God. This is his story; this is what happened to him. He tried pleasure, he tried satisfaction in everything, but he didn't find it. There is one key phrase that I believe unlocks the entire book for us: Life under the sun. This keeps popping up throughout the book. It is repeated over thirty times. Solomon is dealing with life under the sun. Solomon is referring to his time and his pursuit of satisfaction, taking God out of the equation. He will go down all of these avenues to try to be happy and satisfied, but it will all be life apart from God.

- **Solomon's Mission**

We will take God out of the equation and pursue life under the sun, along with Solomon. In his mission, Solomon says, "*And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*" This is his mission. He is seeking his heart and applying it to see what is done under the sun. In other words, Solomon says let's go from the sun down to the earth. Let's see what is happening on the earth. Is there true satisfaction? Is there any gain to all the busyness I see? He says absolutely not. Some of you are thinking yeah, but there are lots of things we can hang on to, a lot of things we can go after that would give us a lot of pleasure and satisfaction. Solomon will take us down every one of those roads.

Life

He talks about life in general. It's as if we are hamsters stuck in a wheel. That basically sums up chapter 1. He said, "*All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*" He gives an example of the sun; it goes up, goes down, goes up, goes down...He says the wind goes round, and round, and round. The streams just flow into the sea, it goes up, it rains, and back to the sea, and starts all over again. Everything just seems to go in this big circle and nothing ever seems to go anywhere. With us, we see but we aren't satisfied. We hear, but we aren't filled with hearing. In other words, we always want more. We pursue and we do and we go; we are hamsters stuck in a wheel. We are running and running, but don't seem to get anywhere. In America, we call it the rat race. We are in a maze that scientist put us in, and we are running around trying to go somewhere. The problem is there is no escape out of the maze. It is enclosed, so we just run and run and run, but never get anywhere. That is the problem that Solomon sees with the earth. There is a lot of busyness, a lot that is going on, but we don't seem to accomplish much if you just look at life under the sun. We will see if Solomon truly finds happiness in some of the same things that you and I pursue to try to find happiness.

Pleasure

Pleasure is tasted but never satisfied under the sun. If you take God out of the equation and just pursue pleasure for pleasure's sake, you will find it doesn't satisfy. You taste it but it doesn't complete you. It doesn't satisfy you or give you what you think it should. I want to read one of Solomon's pursuits for pleasure in chapter 2:1-2, "*I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.'*" *But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, 'It is mad,' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?'*"

- **Substance**

The first thing Solomon pursued was a substance; he takes wine. Verse 3 says, "*I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my*"

heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.” He says I think I can be happy with wine. It’s like those commercials where everyone is bored and someone shows up with a beer truck, and all of a sudden, it is just happiness. It looks like happiness comes in a container. Solomon says I was kind of just social drinking, my heart is still guiding me, and everything is good; I’m just a little happier. But he saw that doesn’t really give him the happiness he wants, so he decides to go get drunk. Now he’s just going for it. He is being a fool; he has folly in his heart. He says this is where happiness is found. For some of you, this is where you look for true happiness. Without some sort of a substance, you are never happy. You can go somewhere, but you always have to have something. We live in a culture that is like that. They are trying to legalize marijuana because it makes us happy and that’s what we want. We just want to be happy in whatever way we can get it, whether it is from drinking or drugs. It is a substance that we think will lead us to happiness and satisfaction. Solomon does it to the fullest. I can just imagine he had the absolute best wine at his disposal.

- **Accomplishments**

Solomon goes on to accomplishments. Look at what he says in verses 4-7a, *“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house.”* Solomon accomplished a ton. One of the ways we pursue satisfaction and pleasure in by accomplishing things. It gives us pleasure; we love accomplishing things. Solomon built all kinds of stuff. He built houses, the temple, pools, and parks. He built forests and streams to water the forest. He built more than we could ever imagine. He is accomplishing everything. We know the more we accomplish, the more we build, the more upkeep those things require. If you get a second house, you have to mow the second house. There are all kinds of upkeep, but Solomon had the ability to have slaves take care of all his accomplishments. He could just sit back and enjoy the third house. He could go on vacation and

everything would be done. We think if we were in this place, we would be satisfied. If I had all I could dream of building and the people to take care of it; that would be happiness. I would be satisfied.

- **Possessions**

Verse 7b says, "*I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.*" Not only did he accomplish much, it brought him possessions. He had a bunch of stuff. He had herds after herds. People would look at Solomon and say you are the biggest farmer in the land. You have more stuff than any of us have. For some of us, we think if we could just get all of the things on our wish list, then we would be happy. If we could get that new truck, that bigger house, this certain item on our wish list, it would make us happy. We may have got that thing we wanted a few years ago. But now we are in the same predicament because we want something else to make us happy. That possession didn't truly satisfy the deep longings of our heart.

- **Money**

Solomon had money. Verse 8a says, "*I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.*" He had all the money he could possibly want. He had ten billion dollars in his bank account! He had it all.

- **Entertainment**

He not only had money, he had entertainment. That is what makes some of us happy; our TV shows, concerts, or sports teams. It is the entertainment that truly makes us happy. Solomon says in verse 8b, "*I got singers, both men and women...*" He was able to bring the concert into his own palace. The celebrities were at his beck and call. They were coming to his party, not him going to theirs. The concerts were given for him. He had all of the entertainment he could ever possibly want.

- **Sex**

One of the key things our culture says you will be happy in sexual intimacy. Verse 8c says, "*...and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.*"

Listen to everything Solomon had; he had substances, accomplishments, possessions, money, entertainment, and sex. He had as much as he wanted of them all, as freely as he wanted, and more than anyone else had of them. He had it all when it comes to what our American culture says could truly make us happy. But look at what he says in verse 11, *"Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."* He says in verse 10 that there was not a single pleasure that he kept from his heart. Whatever his heart wanted or desired, he would go after. He captured all of the pleasures this life could offer. Now, you have to remember who Solomon is. He is the king, which means that he had power, resources, and time. He could actually pursue all of these things. It is just a dream for you and me, but Solomon had the money. He could truly pursue that avenue. He could pursue all these things to the fullest, yet he found that pleasure is tasted but never satisfied in the end. All those things that we mentioned can give pleasure, but it isn't satisfying pleasure. It is limited pleasure for a limited time. You always need more if that pleasure.

What is the answer? Solomon looked at all of it and said it is just vanity; it is worthless. The answer is not in looking under the sun, not in taking God out of the equation, it is putting God in the equation. David, Solomon's father, tells us that pleasure is tasted and satisfied above the sun. In the Psalms, David says in Your presence there is fullness of joy and at Your right hand there are pleasures forever more. He is saying that if you take God out of the equation and pursue happiness and pleasure to be satisfied, you aren't going to find it apart from God. It doesn't matter what you get. If you woke up with ten billion dollars in your bank account tomorrow, you think it will make you happy. But in the end, it will not truly satisfy you if you aren't connected to the One who created you. We can see that! Look at the people who have ten million dollars. Does it keep them out of rehab? Does it make them happy? Often, it makes them more miserable. No worldly things that we can pursue for pleasure can make us truly happy. It is only when we are connected to God that we can be truly happy forevermore. Only in Him are pleasures that truly satisfy; not just for a moment, but forevermore. Solomon went down the road, and at the end,

he realized there is no pleasure in this world apart from a relationship with the Living God.

Wisdom

What would it be like if you knew everything? What if you were the smartest person in the world? The problem with wisdom is that under the sun, knowledge only produces sorrow. That is what wisdom does for us. Solomon said, "*For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*" You would think wisdom would lead you to happiness. Solomon was the wisest person in the world and thought he would be satisfied if he could just know everything about the world. The problem is the more Solomon knew about the world apart from God, the more sorrow he had.

I can relate to this. I have three young boys, and there are many days I envy them. I will go about my day and hear stories and about tragedies that people have suffered. I read the headlines on disturbing things both here and abroad. I know of human trafficking and other disturbing things. The more I know about the world, it doesn't lead to increased happiness. The more I know about it, the more I see how broken it is. But my kids don't see or know half of the things I know. Ignorance is bliss. They don't know a broken world, so they are happy and excited. But as they grow and the more they see the world, the more sorrow and vexation will come to them.

You see, the more Solomon figured out life apart from God, the more he sought out life apart from God, the more wisdom he had apart from God, the more he realized the world is broken. He didn't know how to fix it and it led him to sorrow. We are a culture that pursues knowledge and wisdom. We want our kids to go to college, and that is a good thing. The thought is if we know everything, it will make us happy. The problem is the more we know, the more we realize there is a big problem. Something is broken and we can't fix it.

How does knowledge not lead to sorrow? You can't look at life under the sun. You can't take God out of the equation. You have to put Him in the equation, and you will find that wisdom and knowledge actually finds

satisfaction. It finds satisfaction in the person of Jesus Christ, so for just a moment, we are going to leave Ecclesiastes and fly to Philippians and look at life above the sun. Paul says, "Indeed I count everything as lost because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul's knowing wasn't to figure out the world. It was to know Christ and through Him, to see the world. In knowing Christ, there was surpassing joy; surpassing worth. When he knew Christ, everything was worth it to him. Through knowing Christ, you can understand the world. Yes, something happened and it was called the fall. But there is good news! A rescue has come, His name is Jesus, and there is a restoration coming, which is the new Kingdom. So when you see brokenness, you can see hope through the brokenness. Knowledge does not lead you to despair; it leads you to redemption and Kingdom work because you know a Kingdom is coming that will last forever. That is where your joy is found. If you try to understand the world apart from Christ, you will only be led to sorrow and vexation. If you let knowledge lead you to a relationship with Jesus, then you will find true pleasure.

Righteous Living

The next thing Solomon pursues is living right and doing good. Solomon concludes that under the sun, all funerals are the same. It doesn't matter if you are wise or a fool, you will die, they will put you in a casket, and that is it. It is game over, the power button is done; there is no life after that. Remember, we are talking about life apart from God. There is no God, no afterlife; this is just life under the sun. Let's just deal with the here and now. The wise die just like the fool. This is Solomon's big hang-up; both die. It doesn't matter if you are a wise guy who always listens to your parents, stays in school, goes to college, and gets married. It doesn't matter if you are a good husband and a good father. We think of that as a good life and it would be a happier life than the fool who never obeys his parents, drops out of school, or disobeys the law and goes to jail. That would be a worse life. We could say the wise person is better off than the fool is, but the problem is that both of those people end up in a casket. At that point, it really doesn't matter what they did before that if this life is all there is. If you just get one hundred years and then it's over, it doesn't

really matter if you lived a great life or a bad life. You go to a casket and that's it! Yes, you should be wise, but who really care at the end because we all die and that is the end. This is Solomon's frustration with pursuing life under the sun. When you take God out of the equation, nothing matters. Life is vanity, life is futile; it doesn't matter what you do. At your funeral, it doesn't matter what you have done, people will say nice things about you, and then you will be forgotten. That is what he actually says in the book! What is the hope then? The hope is not in living right under the sun; it is living connected above the sun. Living above the sun, we find that not all funerals are the same. In 1st Peter, the Bible says, "But they will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." In other words, when you put God in the equation, you find that your casket is not the end of the story. Your casket is a new beginning to a new chapter that will last forever! This life really does matter for eternity. At that casket moment, it truly matters whether you are in Christ, or not in Christ. Some funerals lead into eternal bliss and some into eternal misery. Therefore, the life before is not vain or nonsensical, the life before matters for eternity. It matters; it really does matter.

Work

The problem with our work under the sun is we are building a kingdom that will not last. After all the work he did, Solomon said in chapter 2:18-19, "*I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?*" I think Solomon is older here. His problem when it comes to work is that he is working himself to the bone, building and accomplishing, and now he realizes he will have to leave this to his sons. His sons aren't too bright, and they wreck his entire kingdom. I think he saw it coming. Now, we have no remnants of the great temple, the houses, the pools, or the forests he built. None of it is left; it's all gone now! Solomon had spent his whole life building a kingdom that did not last. At the end of his life, he hated that fact.

That is a fact we all need to know. If you are building your own kingdom, it will die with you. No matter how great your company is, in five hundred years, no one will know the name of that company. In five hundred years,

the house you spend so much time investing in will probably be a parking lot. No one will even know you ever lived there. That is the reality of pouring all our lives into our own stuff, our own kingdoms. Solomon couldn't get over the fact that at the end of his life, he would die and none of that stuff would matter anymore.

So what is the answer? How are we supposed to go to work tomorrow if this is true? The answer is not to work under the sun, instead, work above the sun. When we work above the sun, we build a kingdom that will last forever. We do things that truly matter, not just for now, but also for eternity. Solomon gives us wisdom in the chapter 2:24a, "*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil...*" We should enjoy our work! But he says the problem is that as a sinner, we can't. In verses 24b-26, he said, "*...for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*" He says we should enjoy our work, our food, and all of those small things in our life. The problem is that when we are disconnected from God, we don't. We turn God's gifts into gods. We pursue work as a god, and worry about it all the time. We worry what we will do, and what we will build. It becomes our god that we worship. It becomes this gathering and collecting. When we are disconnected from God, even our food can become a god when we think about it all of the time, instead of just enjoying it as a good gift from God. Under the sun, we build a kingdom that will not last, but when we build above the sun, we are building a kingdom that will last forever. If we are connected to God, if we are one who pleases God, then we find enjoyment in all of those things.

Life Above the Sun

The biggest problem in the book is that we all die and there is no resurrection. That is the biggest problem during Solomon's life of pursuing everything without God. Therefore, what is the solution? The solution is the

gospel. In Corinthians, Paul tells us that Christ has died for our sins, was buried, and He rose from the grave three days later. In other words, Jesus defeated sin and death! There is a resurrection because Jesus rose from the dead. Death is not the end; it is entering into eternity because there is a resurrection from the dead. That is the gospel! At the end of 1st Corinthians, Paul said, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." The whole point of Ecclesiastes is that your labor is in vain! Your life is in vain. No matter what you do, it is all in vain, because you die and that is the end of the story. But Paul says hold up...I've got news. There is a Man who rose from the dead and His name is Jesus. He defeated death for you, and in Him, you will rise from the grave as well. Therefore, your life is not in vain. Your work is not in vain. The small things in life are not in vain, because this life is not all. This life is pointing to an eternity that is coming. You will rise from the dead, therefore, whatever you do for the glory of God is not in vain. It points towards eternity and it will last throughout eternity. That is why Paul would say, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Do all for the glory of God because your life is not in vain, it is leading toward eternity.

Solomon's comes to his conclusion in chapter 10:13, "*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*" Solomon pursued all of life, and at the end, everything was about a relationship with the Lord. When you think about all of life and everything that has happened in your life, if you add it all up, your whole duty, your life, is about fearing God and keeping His commandment. It is about worshipping the Lord. But we can make life about so many other things. We can make life about pleasure, about work, and all these other things. But the truth is life is about the Lord, pursuing Him and loving Him.