

What Does It Profit?

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 14, 2023.

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 2:12–17).¹

Among the many things Solomon is famous for, one thing stands above the rest: wisdom. In 1 Kings, we read,

“And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men ... and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. ... And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kings 4:29–34).

No one was wiser than he. So, it should not surprise us that Solomon returns to the topic of wisdom repeatedly in Ecclesiastes, considering its presence and absence, its advantages and limits. Here, he considers it in comparison to “madness and folly” (2:12), arguing that wisdom is preferable to “foolish behavior and ideas” (NET). Life for Solomon may be vanity, but he chooses to live it wisely.

But wisdom has its limits. Wisdom beats folly but death beats both: “the wise dies just like the fool” (2:16). Life under the sun inevitably concludes, as does our memory. Whether wise or foolish, we’re forgotten. Just as I can name only a few of my ancestors and know virtually nothing about them, I too will be forgotten, as will you. And this truth is remarkably frustrating, leading even to despair, because we attach significance to remembrance. In our wisdom we wonder, what’s the legacy I’m leaving? But the sober reality is, the legacy we leave is but a mist, carried away by the winds of time, leaving us perhaps, like Solomon in his pondering, loathing life.

What’s better?

If you haven’t noticed by now, part of Solomon’s intent in these first two chapters is sobriety. He is leading us to wake up to the brevity of our humanity and the insignificance of our legacy and how to live in light of this reality. To do this, he leads us to consider our daily lives and ask

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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what's better? In daily life, what's better: Insight or ignorance? Knowledge or stupidity? Understanding or confusion? Wisdom or folly? If you chose insight, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, you're in good company. Scripture says, "Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight" (Prov. 4:7), and "An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge" (Prov. 18:15). But why? Why is insight, knowledge, and understanding better than the alternative? Why does Solomon say, "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly" (2:13)?

To answer this, consider creation, which Solomon has described in the first chapter not as chaotic but ordered by divine design and upheld by providence. Proverbs reveals,

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew (Prov. 3:19–20).

And if the earth was created by God's wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, we may discern that it continues accordingly.

If creation operates according to order, so also all of life under the sun. Wisdom is better than folly, because wisdom reflects God's design, his order, his economy. Solomon emphasizes this truth by way of comparison, the analogy of light and dark. Wisdom shines like day light, so to speak, on the way to go, while folly is as dark as a starless night. When in doubt, choose the way of wisdom. There's no guarantee that it will get where you need to go, but at least you'll know you're on the right path.

Wisdom is also gain because it is typically rewarded by God and man. For example, when the Proverbs tells us that living wisely is rewarded with a long, peaceful, and prosperous life (Prov. 3:2, 16), we know that this is, at least how it is supposed to be, according to God's economy. It's not a proverbial promise nor guarantee, as we can all think of examples to the contrary, but it's a truism. Contrary to what the world would have you believe, typically, wisdom wins. But not always, and that's wisdom too. As Jeffrey Meyers explains,

Not everything can be fixed! Not everything is a problem to be solved. Some things must be borne, must be suffered and endured. Wisdom does not teach us how to master the world. It does not give us techniques for programming life such that life becomes orderly and predictable.²

Wisdom wins but has its limits.

And it is this realization that leads Solomon the wise to loathe this life. And so may we, when we consider it soberly. If we live a wise and faithful life, we want to reap the rewards, free from problems, free from suffering, forgetting that the life we live under the sun is a fallen one. Amidst his suffering, righteous and wise Job deduced almost the antithesis of Proverbial wisdom, saying,

² Quoted in David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 46

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Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble.
He comes out like a flower and withers;
he flees like a shadow and continues not (Job 14:1–2).

Who wouldn't say the same in his situation? But what happened to Job seems so irrational to us, so contrary to God's design. How can a man famous for his piety be plagued with suffering, granted by God?

What we want is to live in a world where wisdom always wins and folly always fails. Life shouldn't be this way! And that's Solomon's point. It shouldn't, but it is. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes,

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise [...] If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

Lewis goes on explain what living like this looks like, saying,

Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.³

Solomon's frustration, as well as ours, is this life under heaven isn't heaven, and the more we try to make it heaven the more we despair, but when we live as sojourners with gratitude for what God has given yet longing for home, we find that our perspective of life under the sun changes.

Who's remembered?

The great cataclysm in the history of the world happened in the serenity of a garden. Temptation was offered, God's covenant broken, man fell from grace, death displaced paradise. The Fall ruined it all. And now, the wise and fool alike "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), receiving our inheritance and due wages in one, death (Rom. 6:23). All go to the grave: we are "from the dust, and to dust all return" (Eccles. 3:20). As the psalmist reminds us,

For we see that life is ending;
wise and foolish all will die.
They must leave their wealth to others;

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 135-137.

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none can death's demand defy.⁴

Death, as we say, is no respecter of persons, wise and fool alike.

How then do we find meaning in life? Perhaps the point is to make a memorable mark on this life, to leave a lasting legacy, to be remembered. This is the rallying cry of graduation speeches: For what will you be remembered? The intent is of course noble, but somewhat misleading. Consider, for example, Israel's son Joseph who was a faithful child of God, morally unimpeachable, prophetically gifted, administratively skilled, and used by God to save Egypt and Israel's children from famine and financial ruin. And yet, despite his wisdom and honor, within one generation after his death, he was forgotten. He saved Egypt, and Pharaoh didn't even know his name (Ex. 1:8).

The same could be said of the wisdom of Solomon, who was gifted with extraordinary wisdom and reigned over the greatest period in Israel's history. But he, like every son of Adam, died, and the wisdom he gained was not granted to the fool who followed. The legacy that Solomon left was a son who could neither discern wisely nor rule righteously, resulting in a divided kingdom, rampant idolatry, and civil war. Rehoboam's life seemingly fulfilled Solomon's consternation. The wise king's legacy was a fool.

What's next?

At this point, we might be tempted to think that the best one-sentence summary of Ecclesiastes is "Life stinks, and then you die." But it's not. Solomon is simply sobering us up to the fallen human condition and showing us the limits of wisdom and legacy. Rather than preaching, he's reflecting and revealing his loathing of life, because wisdom, while remarkably helpful in this life, doesn't answer the ultimate questions of life. The man gifted wisdom from God learned that through wisdom alone we could not know God.

Knowing God is not gained but given, not achieved through wisdom or works but by grace. If our "chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever",⁵ yet we are fallen in sin by nature, thought, word, and deed, then we indeed should loathe life. What's the point? J.I. Packer asks,

"What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. ... What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. ... Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord. ... For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?"⁶

⁴ Psalm 49:1-13, Trinity Psalter Hymnal (Willow Grove: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), 49.

⁵ "The Shorter Catechism" Q. 1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 355.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 34.

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We who were made in God's image were made to know him, to reflect his glory with the life he's given us, to find pleasure in him forevermore. And this we do not gain through worldly wisdom but only through the wisdom of God himself.

Writing to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul explains that the wisdom of God is Christ himself, which is why "the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Paul then asks boldly, "Where is the one who is wise? ... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For ... we preach Christ crucified ..." (1 Cor. 1:20-23). What led Solomon to loathe his life was the realization that he was looking for life in this life rather than in the Lord of life.

What Solomon faced is not unique but common to us all. How often do we look for significance in the wisdom and ways of this world, when all that we need we have in Christ. How often are we frustrated with this life, because it's not heaven? How often do we pursue gain in this world forgetting that the way of the world is death but the way of the cross is life? Jesus said,

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:34-36).

Indeed, the greatest gain is given: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).