

What's the Use?  
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Ecclesiastes 1:12-15; 2:18-26

Opening: It's a well-known fact among parents and grandparents down through the ages. You give your kids a pile of gifts on Christmas or their birthday and when the gifts are opened they play with --- the empty boxes. To verify this as a universal truth of child's play, in 2005 the "cardboard box" was inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame ®. The hall of fame states: *"With nothing more than a little imagination, those boxes can be transformed into forts or houses, spaceships or submarines, castles or caves. Inside a big cardboard box, a child is transported to a world of his or her own, one where anything is possible."*<sup>i</sup>

Every parent has stood shaking our heads asking, *"Why did I spend money on toys when they could be this excited about a cardboard box?"*

What does that simple illustration have to do with the book of Ecclesiastes and Solomon's search for meaning and purpose in life? Do you think our Heavenly Father ever has a similar reaction as He views His children? *"Through Christ I gave them everything they need for the abundant life today and eternal life forever, but they're content to play with the "empty boxes" of my earthly blessings instead of enjoying that ultimate gift of relationship with Me!"*

It's been said *"don't judge a book by its cover,"* but often the first few words of a book give you a sense of what's to come. In Ecclesiastes 1:2 the writer ("teacher") muses aloud: *"Everything is meaningless, completely meaningless!"*<sup>ii</sup> [I'll bet this guy is a lot of fun at parties!] By reading that verse what would you assume this book is going to be about? What words come to mind? Ever have a friend or family member who is so skeptical and "glass half full" you hesitate to open a conversation by asking, *"How are things?"* Everyone knows someone who has the personality of Winnie the Pooh's "gloomy" donkey friend Eeyore.<sup>iii</sup>

There is a difference with the writer of Ecclesiastes. This wasn't your run of the mill cynic harboring bitterness because he never got a fair shake in life. The "teacher" writing these words to future generations had "been there and done that" in every way possible. He had wealth, fame, romance, toys, even a reputation for real wisdom; yet, in the last quarter of life it was all "meaningless."

Now, much like the beginning of our study in Job you may dread what sounds like a depressing and cynical book trying to dissect what life is really about. As I said at the beginning of Job, hang in with me because there's real value here.

- When we begin a study in a new book I try to give a brief overview. Here are some key facts about Ecclesiastes:

- “The title “Ecclesiastes” comes from the Latin translation of the Hebrew term [for preacher or teacher] in the opening verse.<sup>iv</sup> Think of this as an ancient version of a “TED talk” featuring a famous and wise celebrity talking about his search for meaning in life.
  - Tradition tells us Solomon was the writer but some debate that. For our purposes I’m comfortable with Solomon as our “teacher.”
  - This book is famous for some key terms and sayings:
    - “*Vanity, it’s all vanity!*” Our activity in life is temporary and fleeting like a “vapor” but more than that it’s meaningless.
    - Life “*under the sun,*” describes our earthly struggle (especially apart from God.)
    - “*Chasing after the wind,*” describes futility in life.
    - “*There’s nothing new under the sun.*” Times and technology change but the basic desires, questions, and struggles remain constant through the ages.
  - The good news: While the “teacher” may be disillusioned and perhaps cynical about the toil in life, he hasn’t lost sight of the truth of what gives life meaning and purpose. By the end of the book he answers all his own questions about how to have meaning in life with these words in 12:13 [spoiler alert!] “*Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone’s duty.*”<sup>v</sup>
- The truth that should change us: Seeking meaning and purpose through human pursuits without a relationship with God is like a child playing with empty boxes and ignoring the real treasure inside. “[G]lorifying God provides the only lasting meaning in life.”<sup>vi</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 1:12–18 (NLT) — 12** I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. **13** I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. **14** I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind. **15** What is wrong cannot be made right. What is missing cannot be recovered. **16** I said to myself, “Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.” **17** So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind. **18** The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

- Verse 13: How did this educated “teacher” set out to find meaning in life?
- Verse 18: What was the result of his approach?
- He says this approach to trying to find meaning in life through knowledge was like “chasing the wind.” What does that mean? What effect would chasing the wind have on a human being?

- Lesson #1: Trying to find life's meaning and purpose through human knowledge is like chasing the wind. So where do we find the solution?
- Verse 15 says, "what is crooked cannot be made straight."
- Ever see a "strong man" demonstrate their strength by bending an iron bar? In vaudeville some of them would straighten out a horseshoe. Why would that impress a crowd? Who would volunteer to try? Why not?
- In a sense we often try to do this. How many sleepless nights have we spent trying to untangle past mistakes and regrets? How many have we spent trying to straighten out things that are truly out of our control?
- Why would a follower of Christ try to straighten things out ourselves when we have a Savior and Creator with the power to do that for us?
- Lesson #2: We can't discern meaning or purpose in life apart from God.
- The "teacher" didn't just try to find meaning through knowledge. He tried lots of approaches to find meaning in this "meaningless" existence and he had the budget to do that in a big way.
- He tried pleasure – that was meaningless! He tried wine: that didn't get it done. He built houses and gardens: still meaningless. He bought stuff and built up his investment portfolio: nope still meaningless.
- He hired entertainers (we would binge watch Netflix) but that didn't cheer him up. He turned to women (multiple women) but life was still meaningless.

**Ecclesiastes 2:10 (NLT) — 10** Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. **[Now he turned to his career]** I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors.

- Agree or disagree? Career and work is a good thing ordained by God.
- We've heard the saying, "*Love what you do and you'll never work a day in your life.*" Enjoying your work is good! Supporting your family is right!
- Paul wrote to Timothy in **1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV) — 8** ...if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
- Being successful as a professional and provider can be rewarding!
- Let's see how all this career focus worked out for Solomon.

**Ecclesiastes 2:18–26 (NLT) — 18** I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. **19** And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! **20** So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. **21** Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. **22** So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? **23** Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.

- We said work can be rewarding, yet Solomon found it stressful and meaningless. Where did he go wrong by being career-focused?
- David Moore in his commentary shares this story, “*After the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl in 1972, Tom Brookshire, a famous American broadcaster, asked Dwayne Thomas, a star of the game, “What does it feel like to win the ultimate game?” Thomas declared, “If it’s the ultimate game, why is it being played again next year?”*”<sup>vii</sup>
- A career can be rewarding but it’s not the “ultimate game” in life.
- How many successful professionals have lost their job and also lost their identity and joy because it was all wrapped up in that career?
- Work alone cannot bring us meaning and joy. But wait a minute!

**24** So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work.

- Now I’m really confused! Is Solomon contradicting himself? He said work was meaningless but now he says there’s nothing better. Which is it?
- In the verses 24-26, Solomon clears this up for us with the real lesson.

Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. **25** For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him? **26** God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please him. But if a sinner becomes wealthy, God takes the wealth away and gives it to those who please him. This, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

- The last part of verse 26 might seem confusing so let’s deal with it first.
- God takes the wealth away from sinners and gives it to those who please Him. Is this a kind of “socialism for saints?” We might paraphrase it this way: The person that doesn’t acknowledge God may have wealth but they lack the meaning and joy that comes only from Him. Someone that lives to please God will be given joy in life even if our material resources are modest.
- Verse 24: What did Solomon realize about how to enjoy our work, the provision it brings, and the pleasures in life?
- Our lesson writer: “[W]e cannot make the mistake of making a good thing the ultimate thing. We cannot look to the gifts to give us what can only come from the Giver Himself.”<sup>viii</sup>
- The real lesson in this text comes from verse 25 and the first part of 26.
- No one can enjoy anything in life apart from God. Only God can give wisdom, knowledge, and joy, and He only gives those things to those who please Him.
- There’s the answer! That’s the key! Life apart from God is “meaningless.”
- Even if you have success, resources, and the pleasures of life, they can only be enjoyed through relationship with the “Giver!”
- Just ask Solomon. He tried it all and this was the conclusion he came to.

## So, What's the Takeaway?

- Do you ever have a conversation with yourself that goes something like this? *“I have a beautiful family, a nice life, a good job, our needs are met, why do I feel like it all lacks meaning?”*
- Analyze that sentence. It implies that meaning in life should come as a result of all those wonderful things you possess (or think you earned.)
- Gaining knowledge, working hard, owning nice things, having hobbies and interests are all legitimate gifts from God we can enjoy. The problem comes when we look to them for meaning and purpose in life.
- If we're trying to find meaning in anything apart from our relationship with God we're like a little kid playing with the empty boxes and ignoring the gifts that came in them.
- Take heart! If the wisest man in history got off track so can we. The good news is he cleared things up for us in those last three verses:
  - Everything in our life is a gift from God.
  - We can only enjoy those gifts if we have a relationship with God through His Son Jesus. That is the real treasure in life!
  - He gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please Him.
- When life seems meaningless we need to ask ourselves:
  - Am I focused on my Heavenly Father the One TRUE Source of all meaning and purpose? How is my relationship with Him? Am I living to please Him? Do I find my fulfillment in that relationship?
  - Do I need to repent and ask Him to forgive me for trying to turn “good things” into the ultimate thing? Do I need to confess that I've been trying to find Heavenly joy in earthly things?
- As Solomon asked, *“Who can enjoy life apart from God?”*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.toyhalloffame.org/toys/cardboard-box>

<sup>ii</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ec 1:2). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eeyore>

<sup>iv</sup> Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>v</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Ec 12:13). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>vi</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Introduction to Ecclesiastes) Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>vii</sup> Moore, David. Holman Old Testament Commentary Volume 14 - Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs . B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>viii</sup> Explore the Bible Leaders Guide – Lifeway 2020