

Chapter 21 Ecclesiastes

Wisdom Under the Sun

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Ecclesiastes 1:2

The Bible is fully aware of alternative lifestyles and competing stories. There are different ways to look at our personal stories. We have a choice. Our lives can either integrate or disintegrate, reflect or reject, proclaim or disclaim. The choice is ours. Either things come together or they fall apart. There is a radical change in perspective from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes. The calm, confident optimism of Proverbs stands in sharp contrast to the agitated pessimism of Ecclesiastes (Greek for “preacher,” rendering a Hebrew word that also means teacher, spokesman, commentator, and philosopher). Proverbs works out the wisdom of the Lord in every aspect of everyday life, and Ecclesiastes demonstrates the futility of secular wisdom in a meaningless world devoid of the fear of God. The Teacher purposely chose to explore the meaning of life from a humanistic perspective. In many ways Ecclesiastes is the secular counterpart to the picture presented in Proverbs. It is a carefully crafted assessment of life and work, pleasure and passion, in a world where there is no salvation history. Although the author captures the pathos of this joyless alternative so well that he seems to identify with its conclusions, he clearly intended to move the reader beyond meaninglessness and apathy to a world-view centered in God alone. From the beginning he has been aiming for this truth: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (12:13-14). Let the tale of disappointment, even despair, be told in full, but when all is said and done, let us turn to God for he’s our only hope.

Reality Check

It is best to understand at the outset that faith in God is not something tacked on at the end of this book in order to rescue it from its blatant skepticism, cynicism and negativism. Ecclesiastes is a sustained argument against the meaning that man tries to give to life, as well as a powerful apologetic for the meaning that only God can give to life. Thus Wisdom explores the experience of frustration, futility and failure in the closed universe of our own making and imagining, but also points beyond this secular despair and humanistic malaise to the gift of God. This is not a “how-to” book that offers practical instruction on how to get along in life. Proverbs is best for that, because Proverbs elaborates on Ecclesiastes’ conclusion in a practical, down-to-earth way. The significance of Ecclesiastes is that it is a reality check that causes both those who fear God, and those who don’t, to examine the meaning of life and the validity of their basic convictions. We are drawn into a serious examination that we might not otherwise have considered. Ecclesiastes is committed to delving into the meaninglessness of life strictly considered from a secular point-of-view. The keynote phrase *under the sun* is repeated 29 times to indicate the nature and scope of this inquiry. For the sake of argument, the author’s quest for meaning is confined to life under the sun. But then as he drives his world-denying, life-negating point into our souls, he interjects flashes of true insight that point beyond man’s closed universe of despair.

It is important for the followers of Jesus to allow the wisdom of Ecclesiastes to assess our lives and to discern the fine line between meaning and meaninglessness. Ecclesiastes teaches us that the difference between despair and delight is absolutely singular. The one and only reality that separates us from futility and meaninglessness is the fear of God. This is the fear that drives out fear; the fear that is not afraid of God, but seeks to please God. This is the fear that is best translated as faith, trust, and love.

Ecclesiastes is also important for those who stand outside of faith in Christ. It is crucial for all who honestly seek and inquire into the meaning and significance of life. This biblical book confronts all who pride themselves on their personal achievements, who confidently rely on nature alone, who take stock in their material success, and who believe that they can personally generate a sense of meaning and significance. Ecclesiastes is wisdom's critique of all ego-centric attempts to redefine the meaning of life.

From what we know of Solomon's life, he was especially well-suited for this rigorous assessment of secular life. He excelled in worldly wisdom, sensual pleasure, personal achievement, material acquisition, and political power. The author writes with a conviction born of personal experience and with a passion determined to set the record straight. The author's artistic expression is commensurate with Solomon's renown reputation, and his logical path of inquiry is consistent with his life.

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem, are emphatic. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." The answer precedes the question, removing any secret as to his conclusion. "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" The beauty of the poetry that follows, describing the monotony of an endless cycle of life, seems to belie the very pessimism presented in the poem. Everything that goes around comes around. Life is nothing more than a never ending repetitive routine. "All things are wearisome, more than one can say" (1:8). Generation after generation, day after day, season after season—Lesson one is that life is one big re-run played over and over again. Many religions, from native American to Buddhists, have based their world-view on this cyclical pattern of life, but the author is not about to try and develop the goal of life out of a pattern of life best symbolized by a hoola-hoop. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." All this to say, "What's the point? Nothing matters. No one is remembered."

The one making this assertion should know for he was, after all, the king. "I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after wind" (1:12-14). The author's pejorative view of God is consistent with his limited view of wisdom. From his vantage point under the sun how could he not but be disappointed with God and attribute the burden of life to his Maker. Here the secular mind is neither nihilistic nor atheistic, but deistic. God set everything in motion, but man is left to fend for himself in a broken and burdensome world. This perspective echoes the vast majority of people who say they believe in God, yet live totally

secular lives, and then turn around and blame God for letting them down. Wisdom under the sun makes God out to be an imposition, laying burdens on people that they cannot bear. Many people seem to believe in God only to extent that they blame God for the futility and frustration of their lives.

Chasing the Wind

Given his narrow definition of reality, Solomon gave his verdict before making his case. He boldly declared, “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after wind” (1:14). He arrived at this conclusion based on his personal experience. Drawing on his superior intelligence, undisputed power and vast financial resources, Solomon exploited Self-rule to its maximum potential. He was able to do whatever his heart desired and whatever he set his mind to accomplish. He began by pursuing education: “I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind” (1:17). Depressed by the fact that wisdom and sorrow; knowledge and grief were in direct proportion, it is not surprising that Solomon tried to find fulfillment in having fun. “I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’” But even though he pursued pleasure and entertainment with passion he came to the painful conclusion that it was all meaningless.

So he threw himself into work. What others could only fantasize about, Solomon accomplished on a grand scale in his ego-centric world. “I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards...I bought male and female slaves...I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man” (2:4-8). One would think that Solomon’s seemingly unlimited success as an architect, engineer, environmentalist, agriculturalist, rancher, financier and patron of the arts would bring a sense of satisfaction, but it didn’t. Nor did his unlimited control over people, manifested in his slave-holdings and huge harem, prove fulfilling. In the three categories that society measures status, namely: money, sex, and power, Solomon was superior to everyone past and present. He apparently achieved this position oblivious to the Law of God and without moral sensitivity. For it was not his conscience, in the face of an oppressive and hedonistic lifestyle, that made it impossible for him to enjoy his achievements, but it was the sheer emptiness and futility of it all. Given his amazing resume, Solomon would have been a difficult person to eulogize, if he hadn’t written his own cynical epitaph. “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:11).

In the end, he concluded that it didn’t make any difference whether a person was wise or foolish, because “the same fate overtakes them both” (2:14) and both “will not be long remembered” (2:16). Solomon’s rigorous assessment of wisdom under the sun drew the fatalistic conclusion that death ends all. “Like the fool, the wise man too must die!” What good is it to labor all your life with “wisdom, knowledge and skill” and then leave your hard earned success to someone who didn’t earn it and may be a fool. Of course the secular mind-set that limits the scope of wisdom to nature alone seldom explores end-of-life issues with such blunt force and with such

unabashed self-centeredness. There is no hint in wisdom under the sun that people are living for anything other than personal pleasure and achievement. Family has no place in the discussion. Helping others is not a consideration. Even a secular utilitarian concept, such as the greatest good for the greatest number people, is foreign. Evidently the Teacher was adamant about taking secular wisdom to its logical conclusion, with the predictable result that life under the sun was found to be meaningless (2:23). This was not an abstract philosophical conclusion for him but an awful conviction that led to despair. “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:17).

The Gift of God

Up to this point life under the sun has received a one word label, “Meaningless!” But now a counterpoint is suggested. The picture of an ego-driven, self-exalted, power broker is exchanged for an ordinary person who enjoys the simple pleasures of life as a gift from God. “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (2:24-25). This is a remarkable admission. The meaningless master of the universe sees himself in contrast to the ordinary person blessed by God. The person who lived to please himself is confronted by a person who lived to please God. The seemingly amoral world of slavery, oppression, indulgence, and worldly success, which up til now has been described without any mention of sin and righteousness, is introduced to the real world of God’s blessing and judgment. “To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God” (2:26). Nevertheless, the Teacher, kept the case for skepticism alive by cynically concluding, “This too is meaningless, a chasing after wind” (2:26).

The famous lines that follow tend to confuse interpreters (3:1-8). “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die....” Is this poem about the tyranny of time, a reminder to us that we are subject to circumstances and conditions that we have no control over? Or is it a carefully crafted lyrical testimony to the rhythm and purpose of life? Perhaps how we interpret the meaning of this poem is a reflection of our world-view. It makes sense for Wisdom under the sun to lament the tyranny of time and to conclude that blind determinism governs human affairs. But from the perspective of Wisdom under God, it makes sense to celebrate the rhythm of life governed by God’s providential care. Whether this poem is perceived as an echo of the repetitive cycle of life lamented earlier (1:4-9) or a comforting message extolling the virtue of God’s perfect timing, depends exclusively on the gift of God. Both poems ask, “What does the worker gain from his toil?” (3:9; see 1:3) and both passages refer to “the burden God has laid on men” (3:10; see 1:13), but the secular, *under the sun* perspective in chapter one is transcended by a God-centered perspective in chapter three. The dark cloud of pessimism is lifted and the dogmatic assertion of meaninglessness is eclipsed by the work of God.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his

toil—this is the gift of God” (3:11-13).

The tension in Ecclesiastes lies in the contrast between a meaningless self-centered existence and a meaningful God-centered life. True instruction is found in discerning the difference between the meaning that people try to impose on life and the meaning that God gives to life. The Teacher intentionally used his own life story as a negative example. First, he developed his quest for significance and success, portraying its utter futility and emptiness. Then he contrasted his meaningless chasing after the wind with the gift of God quietly received by ordinary people. The message is clear. Solomon in all his glory did not compare to the God-fearing individuals who found satisfaction in their labor because of God. Ecclesiastes challenges our strategies for success and causes us to re-evaluate our goals and priorities. There is a striking affinity between those who are described in Ecclesiastes as able to enjoy life because of the blessing of God and the early Christian believers who made it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and work with their hands, so that they would win the respect of outsiders (1 Thess 4:11-12). The desire to shun the rat race and “live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” is a lesson right out of Ecclesiastes (1 Tim 2:2). The apostle Paul’s description of the believers at Corinth reinforces Solomon’s perspective. “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many of noble birth. But chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:26-27).

A Picture of Depravity

The Teacher’s critical analysis of life under the sun resulted in a long hard look at the mess of the human condition. He swept aside all the easy answers, political spin and psycho-babble that might have blunted his critique of our fallen world. He was like an oncologist examining a patient or a detective examining a crime scene. He was determined to get to the bottom of this and expose the depravity of the human condition.

Solomon’s critique is more like the stanzas of a modern rock song than a lecture on evil. It’s definitely not a logical journal article or a legal brief. Ecclesiastes reads like the printed words on the CD jacket. They are cutting and provocative, designed to evoke the pathos of our depravity and expose the futility of our lives. Through much of the book, Solomon keeps God at a distance. The mess of the human condition is in the forefront and the mystery of God is in the background. As we might expect from one who pursued his own course with such selfish passion, Solomon tended to refer to God in impersonal terms. The perspective of abiding faith in God does break in at critical points, but only after the remoteness of God is painfully felt. Whenever the author limited his field of vision to life under the sun, God is presented as a distant figure. The more personal name for God, Yahweh, is never used in Ecclesiastes. It is God the Creator who will eventually judge the righteous and the wicked, and hold people accountable for their vowed commitments. But in the present, secular wisdom perceives a distant deity divorced from man’s desperate situation.

From a humanistic point-of-view everything is meaningless. Solomon presents a wide-angled picture of depravity. He claims that we are no better off than animals. In fact, “Man has no

advantage over the animal” (3:18-21). Oppression is so terrible that the dead “are happier than the living” (4:2). Human labor is inspired solely by envy (4:4). Loneliness is the plight of even the wealthy (4:8-12) and social advancement inevitably leads to frustration (4:13-16). Religion offers little comfort and the dangers of false piety are very real. “Do not let your mouth lead you into sin...Much dreaming and many words are meaningless” (5:6-7). The best we can do is hold our tongue and “stand in awe of God.” The political bureaucracy makes even simple acts of justice impossible (5:8-9). And no matter how much money the wealthy have, they are never satisfied. “Whoever loves money never has enough money; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless” (5:10). As the rate of consumption rises the level of satisfaction declines. “The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep” (5:12). No matter how successful a man is he dies like an animal (3:19). Solomon was decidedly pessimistic. “As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain, since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger” (5:16-17).

For a brief moment, the author’s faith perspective shines through this depressing account of life under the sun. Once again we are reminded that there is more to life than the mess of the human condition. It is the gift of God. “Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God” (5:18-19). The joy of living is found in the gift of God, and not, as many would have us think, in personal achievement. God makes the difference between receiving life as a blessing or turning life into a hopeless burden. It is not the meaning that we bring to life, but the meaning that God gives to life that makes all the difference and results in joy. Solomon recognized that the person who receives the gift of God is not overwhelmed by the human condition, but freed up to enjoy life. “He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart” (5:20). The mystery of God shines through this bleak account of human existence and reminds us once again that there is more to life than oppression, injustice, and death.

In the dialogue between wisdom under the sun and wisdom from God it is no secret as to who gets the most “air time.” Skepticism and cynicism rule the debate. The main message is “Meaningless!” and it comes through loud and clear. The Teacher quickly resumes his secular account of man’s sorry state. “I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil” (6:1-2). The skeptic responds to the good news of the gift of God by arguing that God withholds his grace arbitrarily. A person could have a hundred children and live many years, but end up worse off than a stillborn child, if he could not enjoy his prosperity (6:3-6). The Teacher seems to imply that a whimsical God is to blame for human sorrow, but then he argues that man doesn’t deserve to enjoy what he has. “All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied” (6:7). Face it. Life is tragic. “..The day of death [is] better than the day of birth...Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of

pleasure.” (7:2-4).

Mixed in with the Teacher’s extreme pessimism is a random assortment of pragmatic pointers, such as, “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of the fools” (7:9). Or, “Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others” (7:21). Having forcefully made his point that life under the sun is meaningless, he retreats to a calmer perspective. He counsels us to consider what God has done (7:13) and concludes that “God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes” (7:29). God is not responsible for life’s meaninglessness, what we see are the results of fallen humanity. Wisdom dictates that we accept the sovereignty of God, refrain from resisting political rulers (8:2-6), and refuse to worry about the day of our death (8:7-8). In spite of the apparent arbitrariness of justice, the Teacher is confident that “it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God” (8:12). It is better to enjoy what you can as a gift from God, because the world is filled with evil. Human depravity is pervasive. “The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead” (9:3). Therefore, enjoy your health, “eat your food with gladness” (9:7), and love your wife “all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days” (9:9). Make the most of every opportunity. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (9:10). But don’t ever think that your effort creates meaning. Go ahead and invest your money. “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again” (11:1), but don’t think that your investments will increase your enjoyment of life. Only God can do that. Go ahead and plant your seed. Get to work! Labor even if the conditions don’t look very promising (11:4), but don’t ever think that you are sovereign. Don’t confuse your job with the Creator’s, “the Maker of all things” (11:5).

The Teacher insists that it is better to learn these life-lessons young. Kick back and enjoy the sunshine while you can, but don’t be fooled, dark days and tough times lie ahead. “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring judgment” (11:9). While you’re young you may be able to “banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body,” but remember “youth and vigor are meaningless” (11:10). In other words, if you’re counting on being young forever, think again! Faith in God is best cultivated young, before your eye sight fails, your hip gives out, and you find yourself battling depression. How will you hold it together when you’ve played your last game of golf, jogged your last mile, preached your last sermon, and driven your car for the last time? Solomon was insistent that we face the harsh realities of life coming our way and turn to God. “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you say, ‘I find no pleasure in them’ (12:1). Solomon likened the ravages of old age to a house falling apart. The crystal chandelier has crashed, the pipes are breaking and the plaster is peeling. Nothing works anymore. Solomon made his point eloquently. Eventually, everything fails us. “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Everything is meaningless!’”

The Fear of God

Ecclesiastes presents much more than a case against self-sufficiency. It is a relentless attack against any notion that we can generate meaning and significance for ourselves. The Teacher painstakingly works out the practical meaning of total depravity and helps us to see what life is really like under the sun. Perhaps the well-ordered, confident optimism of Proverbs fits our family life, but Ecclesiastes definitely fits the corporate office, urban neighborhood and suburban highschool. By the time Ecclesiastes is through with us we have our pride exposed and our secular strategies of success deflated. The Teacher helps us to understand our misguided secular outlook on life and our ignorant insistence on living as if God didn't count. Solomon referred to his pointed words of wisdom as goads prodding us to pay attention and nails pinning the truth down so we can get a hold of it. However, the Teacher was careful to explain that the source for this wisdom was not himself, but it was "given by one Shepherd" (12:11). The Creator God is not distant and impersonal, but personally present to shepherd us in the truth. God is the author of these truths that reveal the tragedy of living by and for one's self. God is the judge of these little "masters of the universe" whose lives are meaningless. It is God, not just Solomon, that insists that we take a long hard look at life under the sun. And if we persist in living one dimensional lives we have only ourselves to blame for the consequences.

When all has been said, the bottom line in Ecclesiastes is reverent submission to God. Solomon brings the message home. "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14).

Ecclesiastes is a convicting and timely commentary on the apostle John's command, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 1:15-17). Contrary to what some Christians might think, it is important for the followers of Jesus to cultivate a deep-seated resistance to living according to the pattern of this world. We are repeatedly tempted to get out of the gospel story and get into the mind-set of the world. Ecclesiastes is a valuable resource in equipping us to resist the mentality of the world that feeds the ego and fuels the rat race.

Ecclesiastes is also a powerful reminder that there is more to life than the mess of the human condition. Even though its main message is the meaninglessness of life under the sun, the reality of God penetrates the prevailing sense of pessimism and skepticism that colors this work. Solomon would never have accepted the notion that it pays to believe in God even if God doesn't exist. Every once in a while one hears a confessing Christian say something to the effect that life with Christ is so great that even if it wasn't true it would be worth believing it. Solomon would have condemned this way of thinking. His perspective foreshadowed the apostle Paul's conviction when he declared, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people" (1 Cor 15:19). Solomon's rigorous quest for truth cleared the way of all distractions so that the stark contrast between the mess of the human condition and the mystery

of God could be clearly seen. His whole point was that life apart from God doesn't offer a shred of meaning. Meaning comes not from an act of will, but an act of grace. It is the gift of God, "so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8). He was dogmatic. Apart from the reality of the gift of God there is absolutely no hope whatsoever! From our vantage point in God's Salvation History story the followers of Jesus appreciate not only the fact that God alone enables us to enjoy life, but that God has redeemed us from our sin and given us the gift of everlasting life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). If Solomon depended by faith on the early manifestations of this gift of God, how much more should we embrace by faith the full revelation of the gift of God in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor 9:15).