

Week 2 - Where's the Beef? - Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:1-7

Introduction

Last week, we were introduced to Qoheleth as he began his discourse by declaring that all is *hebel*, meaningless vapor, as he asked whether a person can gain some profit or advantage in such a world.

In the poetic section of 1:4-11, he illustrated the repetitive, mysterious, tiring, and all too brief nature of life on planet Earth and implied that there was no gain or meaning to be found in the cycles of nature.

The world as he saw it from his perspective “under the sun” was endlessly busy and hopelessly inconclusive.

So, in the passage before us this morning, Qoheleth turns his search inward and does what people have always done as he tries to think and experience his way to discovering life’s meaning.

If you’re as old as I am, you will remember Clara Peller and her famous tagline, “Where’s the beef?”

Of course, Clara was hawking hamburgers for the Wendy’s fast-food chain, and she got herself into some trouble when she took her search for the beef over to Campbell Soup to advertise their spaghetti sauce.

I guess Wendy’s believed you had to limit your search for the beef.

Qoheleth also limits his search for the meaning of life as he turns from metaphors and perceptions to consider what insight a person can glean from experience.

He scans the limits of human pursuits and shouts, in essence, “Where’s the beef?” regarding the meaning of life.

And this won’t be a meager effort; Qoheleth has the position and means to undertake and complete an exhaustive search of whatever the world has to offer.

He also has the wisdom to undertake his project in a controlled manner and systematically record its results so that we can benefit from his experimentation.

As we turn our attention to the findings of the man who calls himself the Preacher-king, we will break it down into three quests as he plumbs the limits of wisdom, folly, and hedonism.

Look with me first at verses 12-15 [**Ecclesiastes 1:12-15**] -

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 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.

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

I. Quest #1 - Wisdom

Qoheleth was a seeker on a quest for wisdom and knowledge, asking life’s ultimate questions from the core of his being.

Proverbs 1:7 tells us that the fear of the Lord is the basis of knowledge.

And, to be wise means having knowledge and the capacity to use it properly.

We’ll see later in the book that Qoheleth understands the importance of fearing the Lord, but the fear of the Lord will play a small part in this exploration.

Qoheleth will be limiting the scope of his wisdom to the best thinking a man can do on his own as he makes his inquiry.

Last week, we saw how Ecclesiastes was either written by Solomon or someone writing as Solomon.

And we know that Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived.

When Solomon became king in 1 Kings 3, God allowed him to ask for anything he wished with the promise that he would grant his request.

Solomon could have asked for anything: money, long life, or ultimate power, and God would have given it to him.

Solomon asked for wisdom.

God was so pleased with Solomon's request that he said [1 Kings 3:12] –

“Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.”

So Solomon was not only the wisest who ever lived but God was so impressed with his request that God also gave him riches, ensuring he had both the wisdom *and* the means to carry out his quest for the meaning of life.

However, we shouldn't surmise that God's gift of wisdom meant that Solomon instantly knew and understood everything.

God gave him the capacity to understand and properly apply the knowledge he gained but he still had to apply himself to learning, which is precisely what he set out to do here.

Our text says “applied [his] heart to seek and search,” which indicates he put forth a diligent effort, and his inquiry was as extensive as it was intensive, and he set out to learn as much as he possibly could about all he could.

And he gives us a foretaste of his findings in the latter half of verse 13 [Ecclesiastes 1:13] when he says it's an “unhappy business” that God has given us to occupy ourselves.

The NIV translation renders the Hebrew phrase “a heavy burden,” and the NET calls it a “burdensome task.”

But in any event, he's quick to tell us its value in no uncertain terms: it's useless.

One might as well try to catch or shepherd the wind [Ecclesiastes 1:14] as set out to find life's meaning in the pursuit of knowledge.

And yet he states that God has given mankind the desire to know the meaning of life - as God's image bearers, we can't help but try to find answers to life's ultimate questions and we're burdened by the question.

We need to understand that there is nothing wrong with learning - that's not Qoheleth's point.

After all, we can't demonstrate wisdom without having knowledge.

However, Qoheleth limited himself in two significant ways.

First, he restricted his search to what we can learn about the world without special revelation from God.

Notice how often he uses the pronouns I, me, and my - his was a purely personal pursuit.

All truth is God's truth wherever you find it.

And whatever we can learn about the world around us that's true, meaning that it conforms to the actual state of things, is a gift from God regardless if it comes from special revelation or our own observation and experience.

Many people who don't know God possess great knowledge and maybe even a significant amount of wisdom.

The question is, how far will that brand of wisdom take us?

Second, Qoheleth looked to knowledge and wisdom to supply life with meaning - and that's something it cannot do.

Devoting one's life to a quest for knowledge for the sake of knowledge will always lead to emptiness.

That's because those who possess the most worldly knowledge tend to walk by calculation and not by faith.

Qoheleth discovered as much as he declares in verses 13-14 before summing up his search for meaning in knowing with a proverb in verse 15 [Ecclesiastes 1:15].

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Precisely what Qoheleth means, but “what is crooked” is unknown, but if we look ahead at 7:13 [**Ecclesiastes 7:13**], we find that there are things God wants to be crooked.

In reality, some things in life are so bent out of shape that we can't make them straight again, and despite our best efforts, some of our circumstances can't be corrected.

Likewise, whether Qoheleth means to say you can't count something that doesn't exist or that things are missing that we don't even know we don't have, there are things in this life that simply don't add up.

Looking at verse 15 in its entirety, we have to face the fact that there are things in this life we can't do anything about. Life is what it is, and we can't think our way out of all the problems it presents.

In verse 16, Solomon engaged in a bit of internal dialogue as he recounted what he had discovered so far [**Ecclesiastes 1:16**], saying to himself:

“I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”

Again, this was all true and not simply an idle boast, and it reminds us of Solomon, who the Bible tells us was the wisest man who has ever lived.

He had taken the path of knowledge and wisdom as far as he could down the path of knowledge and wisdom and come up short.

If Solomon couldn't find the meaning of life down that road, it's not there.

That hasn't stopped people from trying, though, as we saw in Paul's day with those who gathered in the Areopagus and today in our universities and elsewhere.

Coming up short didn't mean Qoheleth was ready to throw in the towel, though.

He hadn't yet investigated wisdom's opposite, folly, and whether one could find the meaning of life through frivolity.

Look with me at verse 17 [**Ecclesiastes 1:17**], where Qoheleth writes:

I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

II. Quest #2 - Folly

“Madness and folly,” in this case, points us more to the idea of morality and not simply something things that are unserious or insanity because true folly is living in disobedience to God.

In other words, Qoheleth was trying to discern whether the goal of life was to live morally or whether you can flaunt God's morals.

Many people today take that same approach to life.

Whether or not they believe in God, most people still believe there is a difference between right and wrong and endeavor to lead good, moral lives according to whatever standard they apply to those terms.

Naturally, any diligent scientist will test every hypothesis to see where it leads.

So Qoheleth set out to weigh wisdom and folly, morality and immorality, against each other.

He had already thoroughly examined the bounds of wisdom, so he immersed himself in folly.

Looking at the record of Solomon's life, we might say that he perhaps went too far in embracing folly.

Of course, that's true of any of us because it's not possible to sin a little bit and call it acceptable - sin expands.

I encourage you to read the first part of 1 Kings 11, where you will see the tragic result of Solomon's foolishness that led him to marry foreign wives contrary to God's command and how those wives led him into idolatry.

He went so far as to build high places for Chemosh and Molech and steered Israel away from God.

Thus, the man to whom God granted more wisdom than any other learned so much more about folly than anyone ever should.

Ultimately, he was forced to conclude that *this also is but a striving after wind*.

And he closes out his experiment with wisdom and folly in verse 18 [**Ecclesiastes 1:18**], saying:

For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Vexation speaks of irritation and frustration, and I think Qoheleth is saying, at least partly, that the more he learned, the more he realized he didn't know.

Knowledge seems contrary to logic in that regard, doesn't it?

It would seem that the more a person learns, the less there would be to learn.

And in a technical sense, that's true.

But the reality is that as one's circle of knowledge increases, the sphere of ignorance they inhabit seems to enlarge.

Like the sea that's never filled by the streams that feed it and our eyes and ears that are never satisfied, there is never an end to learning because the more one learns, the more one recognizes all he has yet to learn.

Ignorance is bliss, as they say, and Qoheleth says much wisdom leads to much vexation.

But that doesn't mean it's better not to learn.

There is wisdom in learning.

We simply have to accept that as long as it's limited to the realm "under the sun," neither knowledge nor its counterpart provides us with life's meaning.

Qoheleth didn't consult God's Word or pray to God for insight.

He went on his quest for knowledge and investigated unaided by God's revelation to mankind.

And whenever someone tries to understand the world on their own terms rather than on God's terms they are bound to come up empty.

That's why God tells us not to boast in our wisdom, saying through Jeremiah [**Jeremiah 9:23-24**], –

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom...but let him boast in this, that he understands and knows me...

Christ is called the "wisdom of God" in **1 Corinthians 1:24** and the "wisdom from God" in **1 Corinthians 1:30**, and he is the wisdom that leads us to discover the meaning of life.

However, Qoheleth still wasn't beaten.

He didn't find life's meaning in wise, moral living under the sun as he could best understand it apart from God's revelation, so he turned to consider a life of unbridled hedonism as he continued his quest.

III. Quest #3 - Hedonism

Giving oneself over to the pursuit of pleasure is more possible in America today than ever before.

We have been blessed with material blessings far beyond those of most people throughout history, and our options for distraction and entertainment are unsurpassed.

Kathy and I laughed earlier just this week about how, back in the day, you had to schedule your TV viewing to catch a movie or show, or you would miss it.

Remember those primitive days?

Now, we can enjoy almost anything we want, any time we want, 24/7/365.

There are very few restrictions on finding content for our viewing or listening pleasure - it's all out there all the time.

And yet, our appetite for pleasure has grown far beyond what this world can provide, and we still suffer from boredom and malaise.

Without sensing the irony, we sing along with Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, “I can’t get no satisfaction,” while surrounded by pleasures that would make kings of old envious.

Qoheleth tried to think his way to the meaning of life.

He looked at the example of nature and saw only futility and meaninglessness in its patterns.

He used his mind to try and sort out the mystery of human existence, looking at it from all sides, only to have his quest lead to exasperation and sorrow.

Thus far, nothing “under the sun” had given him the answer he was searching for, but he wasn’t ready to lift his eyes to look above the sun just yet.

And we see him declare in the first verse of chapter 2 [**Ecclesiastes 2:1a**],

“I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.”

The word “test” indicates that Qoheleth is setting out to conduct a controlled experiment.

He isn’t setting out on a path of unrestrained frivolity; it’s a deliberate, calculated attempt to learn something from personal experience.

And what he wants to experience are the pleasures of life.

There’s a line in a song performed by U2 that Johnny Cash sings lead on.

It’s called “The Wanderer,” and it contains a line that goes like this:

“I went out there/In search of experience/To taste and touch and to feel as much/As a man can before he repents.”

I think that describes Qoheleth at this point in his search as he chooses to make his own personal happiness his chief end in life to see where that path leads him.

We aren’t left in suspense as to what his quest will reveal, though, as he tells us in the last part of the verse [**Ecclesiastes 2:1b**], *But behold, this was also vanity.*

However, we shouldn’t think that Qoheleth was cutting his experiment short as he reveals in verses 2-8 all the pleasures he tried before arriving at his conclusion.

First, we see that he tried experimenting with **comedy and laughter**.

Like many people today, Qoheleth flitted from one form of entertainment to another, trying to find fulfillment in the distraction of humor - to joke his way through life.

But in the end, he determined that laughter for its own sake was madness and gaiety was useless as a meaning for life.

Second, we see him turn to alcohol.

Look with me at verse 3 [**Ecclesiastes 2:3**],

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.

I want to park on this verse for a little while because it’s one that is often abused.

The key to understanding Qoheleth’s meaning is the phrase, “My heart still guiding me with wisdom.”

Qoheleth was operating within the parameter of wisdom.

He wasn’t on a bender, getting sloppy drunk and losing control.

After all, **Proverbs 20:1** tells us being led astray by wine is not wise.

Qoheleth was engaged in a controlled experiment.

He wasn't giving himself over to strong drink but drinking in moderation as more of a connoisseur seeking out and sampling the best spirits and then soberly and thoughtfully assessing his experience.

But we see why this path ended in disappointment in the latter half of the verse, where he talks about the brevity of life.

Remember, Qoheleth was looking for something that would give life meaning, and here we see that he was experimenting to see if alcohol, as a lubricant to laughter, might speed up his quest - after all, life is short.

Qoheleth was probing beyond pleasure, using it as a flight from reality to see if the secret to life lay beyond rationality.

And that path left him disappointed, so he next turned his attention to more creative pursuits and the finer things of life.

Look with me at verses 4-8 [**Ecclesiastes 2:4-8**],

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. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

As we begin, I want to point out some things we can easily read right past.

First, everything occurs in the plural in this section.

He doesn't build *a* house or plant *a* vineyard - everything is multiplied.

Second, these aren't public works - everything is done for himself.

All of the parks, gardens, pools, and so forth were part of his private residence.

Qoheleth set out to create a secular Garden of Eden for himself, hoping the effort would reveal the meaning of life.

Only in his Eden we see there are no forbidden fruits - everything is there for him to enjoy.

Qoheleth's life was the epitome of "Eat, drink, and be merry" [**Luke 12:19**].

He had everything this world has to offer, and he set out to enjoy it all.

If Qoheleth had lived in the 1990s, he would have undoubtedly been featured on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and everyone would have wished to be in his shoes.

But, at the end of it all, we see Qoheleth look back over all he had done with the sad summary in verses 9-11 [**Ecclesiastes 2:9-11**].

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 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.

The psalmist prayed [**Psalms 119:37**], "Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways."

But Qoheleth went in the opposite direction.

When he saw something he wanted, he took it.

When he wanted to engage in some worldly pleasure, he did so.

If he desired something that didn't exist, he built it.

He had the means to do anything he wanted to do - and he did it all to the utmost.

And, in his mind, he had earned it all, and whatever pleasure he derived from it was only the reward for all his toil.

At least, that's what he wanted to think.

But, since his wisdom remained with him, he was forced to conclude as he surveyed it all that it was *hebel* - meaningless vanity and a striving after the wind.

We have more opportunities to sample life's pleasures today than Qoheleth could ever dream of, but the end result is the same and all our knowledge, wisdom, morality, and pleasure vanish like a warm breath on a cold day when we die.

Conclusion

In 1969, Peggy Lee recorded a song titled, *Is That All There Is?*

In it, she recounts three events from her life.

The first is her memory of watching her family's home burn down when she was a little girl.

Then she sings about her daddy taking her to the circus when she was twelve, and then about finding and losing her first love interest.

And after recounting each event, she asks the same question: "Is that all there is? Is that all there is to a fire, to a circus, to love."

It's kind of a strange song because she speaks each verse but sings the chorus, which goes:

Is that all there is, is that all there is
 If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
 Let's break out the booze and have a ball
 If that's all there is.

The song ends with her interrupting herself mid-chorus and talking about how some might wonder why she doesn't just end it all if that's her worldview before answering by saying she's not ready for that final disappointment.

And claiming how, when her final moments come, she will still be asking, "Is that all there is?"

It's a truly disturbing song, but it's the song many could sing.

Thankfully, we know that what the world offers isn't all there is.

Something astonishing happens when we turn to God and ask him to save us in the name of his Son; all the legitimate pleasures of life that once failed to satisfy become new, and we can enjoy them as God intends as his good gifts to us.

As King David declared in **Psalm 16:11**, there is pleasure in God's presence as he gives it to us.

We can laugh and joke and find true joy in it - as a gift from God.

We can enjoy all things properly as gifts from God.

Qoheleth gets around to revealing in **Ecclesiastes 9:7** that even drinking wine isn't the problem many in the churches make it out to be.

The psalmist also declares it to be a gift from God to be enjoyed in **Psalm 104:14-15** saying to God:

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.

All the things that left Qoheleth empty - knowledge, wisdom, morality, food and drink, sex, creative ventures, and so forth can be sources of joy when we accept them as gifts from God's hand and properly experience them with thanksgiving.

The problem isn't with the gifts but the emphasis and expectations we place on them.

God isn't a spoilsport out to keep us from enjoying life as we sojourn here. Just the opposite!

God simply wants us to find our satisfaction and joy in him as the meaning of life, and once we do, all his other gifts become true pleasures. - Let's pray.