

## Week 3 - Walk Wisely, Work Hard, Die Anyway - Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

### Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-23

#### Introduction

The 1992 movie Radio Flyer, starring Tom Hanks, is premised on the idea that, as we age, we lose certain abilities.

In the movie, what we lose is called the “seven lost secret fascinations and abilities,” and it’s a fairly complete list of the things that slip away as we grow older.

However, there is one the movie doesn’t mention that I think is equally remarkable and as much of a loss - insatiable curiosity and the willingness to ask why.

Anyone who spends time around a small child soon wearies of the endless stream of “Why?” that issues forth on any topic - you never seem to come to the end of why.

But, sadly most people stop asking why as they grow and mature.

I’m not sure if we become content with not knowing all the answers, if we begin to believe we already know all the answers, or if we simply allow ourselves to invent answers.

Over time, though, the steady stream of “Why’s?” slows to a trickle and, occasionally, stops altogether for most of us.

Some people, though, never stop asking “Why?” - Especially about the big questions of life.

That was Qoheleth.

Qoheleth loved to ask, “Why?” and was willing to go on a thorough quest to find life’s meaning.

So far, we’ve seen him look to knowledge and wisdom to provide the answers, only to discover things that his mind couldn’t straighten out and didn’t add up.

Then he thought that perhaps living a life of morality would give it meaning but soon became even more frustrated and sorrowful.

Not one to be easily defeated, Qoheleth next turned to pleasure, figuring since wisdom led to sorrow, perhaps self-indulgence would be the answer.

Still, the answer was the same no matter where he turned: it was all vanity and a meaningless striving after the wind.

But Qoheleth wasn’t dissuaded from his search, and in our passage today, we see him return to look a second time at an avenue he had already considered to see if he might have missed something.

In this, we recognize ourselves as we always look in the most logical place and only look elsewhere when we fail to find it.

Then, when we still can’t find it in other places, we often circle back to look in that first, most logical place again just in case we missed something when we first looked.

I did that this past week during our kitchen remodel when I couldn’t locate my favorite curved claw hammer.

I looked where I was staging my tools and then everywhere else I could think I might have laid it down, but I must have returned to the tool staging area three or four times during the search.

Eventually, I assumed I must have left it in the attic when I was doing some work up there and made a note to look for it the next time I was up there and went and got a different hammer - I have lots of hammers.

The funny thing is, I found it later, right where I thought it should have been all along, hidden under something else.

So it pays to double back and recheck because one never knows when they might have missed something, even when they thought they were being thorough.

So, let's begin by looking at verses 12-14a [**Ecclesiastes 2:12-14a**], where we'll see Qoheleth take another look at wisdom and folly:

*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.*

## **I. A Second Look at Wisdom and Folly**

Verse 12 could just as easily be read. I "returned" to consider wisdom and madness and folly because this is Qoheleth's second consideration of them.

He's being thorough and making sure he didn't miss something in his first look.

Our ESV Bible breaks up madness and folly when they should go together as one term.

Qoheleth is comparing two categories - wisdom and mad folly.

You will remember that wisdom is used in the sense of what mankind can deduce on their own without special revelation from God.

It's the wisdom of the world - good practical thinking - what we might call common sense, and mad folly would be its opposite.

Qoheleth takes one more stab at comparing the two and re-weighs the difference between living in the way that makes the most practical sense and living foolishly.

He is making sure that he is providing the definitive answer to the question - the last word on the matter, so to speak.

That's what he means by the last part of verse 12 - when he comes up with the answer, no one who comes later will be able to add to or alter it - at best, they will repeat his experiment and come to the same conclusion.

What his second look reveals isn't all that surprising - wisdom is better than folly.

It's not even close - the difference is the same as between night and day.

In 1:18, he may have discovered that increased knowledge and wisdom results in increased vexation and sorrow, but there's still no comparison.

In contrast to the person who walks wisely, the fool stumbles through life blindly.

It's always better to be in the light than in the dark, as we learn very quickly when the power goes out as we're crossing a room - even if it's a room we think we know quite well.

Some years ago, I worked as a chaperone looking after a group of blind students as they were transported to and from their residential school each weekend.

In that role, I regularly had to tell them where we were on our route, if their parent was waiting when we arrived, and gather their possessions so they could leave the bus.

And while most of them navigated life with fantastic skill, occasionally, I would have to corral the young person who would get off the bus and head confidently for the dorm - in the wrong direction.

No one can deny there are advantages to being able to see clearly.

So Qoheleth shows us our first glimmer of hope as up to now, all has been vanity.

Knowledge and wisdom have limitations, but it's still better to be wise than foolish.

But Qoheleth isn't ever satisfied until he's considered a thing as far as he can.

So he follows the paths of wisdom and folly clear to the end of life to see if the benefits still hold.

And what he finds brings us right back down to earth.

Look with me at verses 14b-15 [**Ecclesiastes 14b-15**], where he declares:

*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.*

## **II. The Great Equalizer: Death (14b-23)**

Death is no respecter of persons, and everyone who has ever lived has an appointment with death [**Hebrews 9:27**].

Realizing this, Qoheleth suddenly sees that there is little to commend living wisely because, in the end, it won't matter.

The paths of the wise man and the fool eventually arrive at the same place.

Author Cormac McCarthy wrote a novel, No Country for Old Men, that the Coen brothers made into a movie in 2007.

Both contain a scene where the story's villain is menacing a man, and the villain asks, "If the rule you followed brought you here, of what use was the rule?"

Qoheleth could have written that scene as he questions why he had expended so much time and energy on wisdom and suffered the vexation and sorrow that comes with it when that path eventually converges with the other.

Any advantage wisdom brings is only temporary under the sun.

Then he thinks further and sees that not only do the fool and the wise both die but they are both soon forgotten.

Not only does death rob every individual of the gain that might result from wisdom, hard work, skill, or good fortune, but their accomplishments will also, in time, pass into the mist of memory with them.

Some achieve enough to be remembered long after they have passed away - a tiny percentage, as it turns out.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 10:7, "The memory of the righteous is a blessing," but Qoheleth doesn't seem so sure that either will be remembered for very long.

Not that being remembered is much of a comfort anyway, as filmmaker Woody Allen once quipped, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying."

In chapter 3 [**Ecclesiastes 3:11**], we will read that God has placed eternity into the hearts of men.

Because he has, we expect more than a temporary existence, and we're dissatisfied with the realization that our lives are nothing more than a vapor in the face of eternity.

The knowledge of death creates a kind of baseline anxiety in our hearts that keeps us from fully embracing and enjoying life - even at a time when our living conditions are already better than at any time in history and constantly improving.

There's a scene in the comedy What About Bob? where Bob and a young boy named Siggy are sharing a room and talking before going to sleep, and Siggy asks Bob if he's afraid of death.

Bob answers in the affirmative, and Siggy replies,

"Me too. There's no way out of it. You're going to die, I'm going to die, it's going to happen. What difference does it make if it's tomorrow or 80 years? I'm going to die; you are going to die."

Of course, the scene is played for laughs, but the reality isn't so funny as the inevitability of death weighs on us all.

The day is coming when we will draw our last breath; we will be gone and soon forgotten, and we don't like it.

Qoheleth certainly didn't.

Look with me at verse 17 [**Ecclesiastes 2:17**], where he moves from being disappointed and disillusioned about life to outright hatred of life itself.

Dwell on that verse for a moment and feel Qoheleth's despair.

He doesn't just hate his life or the circumstances he presently finds himself in - he hates life in general.

We need to remember that Qoheleth is still looking at things as they are "under the sun," and he's describing life from that perspective.

Nobel Prize-winning author Francois Mauriac is quoted as having said, "You can't imagine the torment of having had nothing out of life, and of having to look forward to nothing but death, of feeling there is no other world beyond this one, that the puzzle will never be explained."

Sadly, untold numbers of people can imagine that torment all too well because they, too, are living it.

The only way to get beyond the hatred of life that Qoheleth expresses and many people feel is to look above the sun.

But we can't go there just yet, as Qoheleth has more to say about life under the sun.

In verses 18-23, Qoheleth turns to focus on work.

We are prone to think that work is a part of the Genesis curse, and based on his take here, I believe Qoheleth would agree.

And work does have its problems - there's no doubt about that.

As a part of the curse, God has caused our labors to be arduous and filled with frustration - work has indeed become vanity.

Qoheleth mentions two main problems surrounding work.

**First**, he says the problem is that someone else profits from our labor after we're gone because, when we die, we leave behind everything we have worked for [**Ecclesiastes 2:18**].

Sooner or later, all the fruits of our labors must pass on to others, and we lose complete control of them.

To be sure, we make plans for our possessions after we die, but many a will is contested, and the living overrule the wishes of the one who labored for what they have left.

Maybe your possessions will end up in good hands - then again, perhaps they won't.

King Solomon is a prime example of this frustrating reality because when he died, his eldest son, Rehoboam, inherited all his property only to lose ten-twelfths of his father's kingdom.

You would think that the natural man would care very little what happens to his possessions after he dies - but we do.

And the fact that one man does the work and another reaps the benefit - perhaps just to squander it - seems unfair.

That's especially true in light of the **second** issue Qoheleth turns to - the burdensome nature of work itself.

Look at verses 22-23 [**Ecclesiastes 2:22-23**], where his verbiage fully reveals the vanity of work.

His description of toiling under the sun produces the image of a person sweating as they labor in the hot sun.

And work often does have a physical component to it that's burdensome.

But work also takes a mental and emotional toll on us, as we see in Qoheleth's description of "striving of heart."

There can be a lot of strain on both body and spirit without reaping any lasting gain.

Work can lead to suffering and sleepless nights - day and night, there seems to be no relief from the burden of work.

Think about the worry that work brings - there are times when we're burdened by so much work that we're concerned about how we'll get it all done, and, at other times, we are anxious about having enough work.

In the end, Qoheleth finds that work is as meaningless as any other facet of our lives, and work will leave you empty if you make it your life's focus.

Having taken another look at wisdom and folly and weighed work in the balance, Qoheleth still concludes that all is vanity.

But then he suddenly comes to a realization that gives us a glimmer of hope; however, it is also tempered with a sense of resignation in the end.

### **III. Realization and Resignation (24-26)**

Look with me at verses 24-25 [**Ecclesiastes 2:24-25**], where we see a ray of hope shine through the vanity

*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

One commentator has labeled these verses “an oasis of optimism in a wilderness of despair.”

The overworked individual who has loaded his days with work and his nights with worry has overlooked the simple joys that God was offering him.

Far from being meaningless, the work he viewed as a cruel tyrant was actually a gift from God if only he had the grace to recognize and receive it as such.

When God is brought into the picture, things that had failed to give life meaning take on a life of their own.

There is a way that he can find joy as he eats, drinks, and labors, and it’s not because those things have changed.

What spoils those things is our hunger for them and the expectations we place upon them.

What makes them a source of joy is God’s presence in them.

Pastor Ray Stedman put it this way in one of his books:

“Isn’t it strange that the more you run after life, panting after every pleasure, the less you find, but the more you take life as a gift from God’s hand, responding in thankful gratitude for the delight of the moment, the more that seems to come to you?”

The problem isn’t with the things themselves but how we approach them as entitlements and put too much emphasis on them, expecting them to give our lives meaning.

We must receive our food and drink - actually all pleasures, as coming from the hand of God and engage in everything for God’s glory [**1 Corinthians 10:31**].

Work is also included in that “all” that we are to do for God’s glory.

The key to experiencing more pleasure and less burden in your work is to work for God and not yourself.

Set aside your career ambitions and concerns about your workload, schedule, and paycheck, and ask yourself whether your work pleases God - both in what you are doing and how you are doing it.

Then, determine whatever you do to do it for God because that’s where the fulfillment is found.

As **Colossians 2:23-24** says –

*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.*

Turning to verse 26 [**Ecclesiastes 2:26**], we encounter a couple of different ways to interpret what Qoheleth is saying.

One school of thought is that Qoheleth is describing two classes of people: those who live under the mercy of God and those who persist in their sins and the results for each.

With that interpretation, we would see those who please God being the recipients of spiritual blessings and those who don’t please God suffering frustration because they find no reward for their toil but only loss.

However, I think it best not to understand the verse as being about retributive justice and reaping what one sows.

I think Qoheleth is talking about God's sovereign freedom to distribute his gifts as he pleases, not the moral distinctions we are naturally prone to draw from the descriptions of "*those who please [God]*" and "*sinners.*"

I believe that interpretation fits better with the tone and tenor of Ecclesiastes at this point in Qoheleth's exploration, as it speaks to the unpredictable nature of things and the fact that we can never fully understand life's complexities.

And it seems to fit Qoheleth's conclusion at this juncture to say that we should simply receive what God gives us with joy rather than anxiously try to anticipate or control what God might do - that would be to strive after wind and vanity.

I admit it sounds rather fatalistic, but all of Qoheleth's conclusions have been depressing to this point, so there is little reason to expect him to come to a radically different conclusion now.

Besides, we know that those who please God don't always prosper, and those who unrepentantly continue in their sin don't always experience frustration and loss - at least not "under the sun."

In fact, we often see just the opposite, and that's a part of our frustration with life.

But God's Word tells us it won't always be the way it is today, and that is the source of our confident expectation.

However, I believe such a forward-looking stance is beyond Qoheleth at this point in his journey.

What we have here is more like a ray of sunshine that breaks through a cloudy sky and momentarily gives a glimpse of the glory that lies beyond the clouds before the clouds close again, shutting it out.

## Conclusion

We live, we work hard and try to live wise, moral lives but in the end, death comes for us all and all we've achieved and earned gets left behind.

Others will either divide our possessions among themselves and treat them either wisely or foolishly but we have no control over what happens.

We're gone and all too soon forgotten.

Viewed from that perspective, it's enough to make one question the value of life itself - it seems so...pointless.

Based on that worldview one might as well live as they please, grab all they can, and wring every ounce of enjoyment out of life while they're here.

After all, what's the point in playing the game by any other rules if every card in your hand gets trumped in the end?

The portrait of the faithful that we find in God's Word is seldom the picture of one who is fulfilled in this life.

Instead, what defines the believer is hope, the confident expectation that there is something more, something better and that satisfaction of our deepest yearnings is heaven's business.

So, does all this mean we shouldn't expect to find any measure of happiness or enjoyment "under the sun?"

Not at all!

What we should take away from these verses is that wisdom and knowledge are indeed better than ignorance and foolishness and that it's possible to find some measure of contentment in our work and the pleasures of life.

But not by making those things the focus of our lives.

Without God, they don't have the capacity to bring meaning to life that has any chance of enduring.

Therefore, we find ourselves again facing the question, "How do people handle life without God?"

With Qoheleth as the supreme example, we would have to conclude they handle it badly and with much frustration.

The bottom line is this: the fulfillment and satisfaction for which human beings long are not the result of self-effort.

The gifts of true pleasure aren't achieved nor grasped; they aren't planned nor produced.

They must simply be received from God with thanksgiving and enjoyed for their own sake and God's glory.

Perhaps that gives us a glimpse of a deeper meaning behind Qoheleth's words in verse 26.

Those who please God will recognize that all good things come from God [**James 1:17**].

They will accept them from God's hand and give him the glory and honor thanking him for all his good gifts.

And isn't that the ultimate meaning of "wisdom and knowledge and joy" in Qoheleth's search here?

Meanwhile, those who don't know or don't acknowledge God look to temporal things to give their lives meaning and, as a result, are ensnared in a futile struggle.

Again, as I assured you last week, God isn't the Great Cosmic Killjoy who expects us to suffer as we sojourn and turn our back on all earthly pleasures.

He simply wants us to keep them in their proper place and to look to him to find satisfaction and meaning in life.

And when we do, we will find that all the things that frustrate most people provide us with joy and contentment that the rest of the world can't comprehend.

Let's pray.