

got wisdom? Lesson 3

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11

Solomon as “The Preacher” and King of Israel sets out on a search for meaning and purpose in life (Vs. 12-14). He is in a unique position that allows him to test all those things for which men yearn when searching for satisfaction. Over time he discovers that it is a frustrating and exasperating task because the search is vain.

It is the wisdom of those who guide us to a better life in the here and now; how to live a healthier, happier, more prosperous life. It has value and can better our lives but, if it doesn’t prepare us for our eternal reality, it has no true answer to the meaninglessness of life. It only shows us how to live our meaningless lives better. (Vs. 12-14)

Interestingly, he views this search as a burdensome task and responsibility of mankind; our own obligation to seek and search out the meaning of life through the wisdom of the world (Prov 4:1-9). It’s his suggestion that God has deliberately built a system where life seems meaningless and empty without the understanding of a living, active God to whom we are accountable.

We would likely agree that all of it is vanity and grasping after the wind. We could imagine that upon our exhaustion we would eventually and finally turn toward God for His wisdom and for Him to give meaning to our lives. This is a sign of the great love and mercy of God, that He built within us the desire and need for that which brings meaning and fulfillment to life; Himself.

The search “under heaven” for meaning and fulfillment has brought Solomon to an unfortunate reality; one that we all have to embrace (Vs. 15) It is what it is. The point is that our understanding of these things won’t change anything because these things will always be (Mk 14:7). There will always be those who labor and are lazy; save and spend; honest and dishonest; etc.

Furthering the idea of the futility of the things that men pursue, i.e., worldly greatness, wisdom, and knowledge, is that acquiring them typically results in greater grief and sorrow (Vs. 16-18). To have insight and knowledge of all the things crooked that cannot be made straight is to know all the inevitable pain, suffering, hardships, and success that comes with life itself.

The grief associated with wisdom is found when we realize that in our human ability, nothing can be done to change these tendencies of life. While we may not have the answers, solutions, or cures to life’s ills, it does not mean that we do not have a responsibility to help bring about change for who and what we can.

With the inability to find meaning and fulfillment in greatness, wisdom, and knowledge, “The Preacher”, now shifts to explore fleshly and worldly pleasures (2:1-3). This self-administered test was to determine how much fulfillment he could find in the common nature of our senses. This testing is similar to how God tests us for our growth and development (Deut. 8:2-3, 16).

Still searching for true satisfaction and happiness of heart in this life the preacher turned from seeking out wisdom to seeking out various pleasures. Pleasure and mirth are vain because of their inability to positively accomplish anything. They are merely escapes from problems, not solutions.

The preacher drank wine but tempered or toned it down with wisdom to not allow himself to get so drunk as to lose sight of reality (Prov 23:29-35). Yet, he discovered, as we all have, that fleshly satisfactions are temporary at best and bring nothing more than momentary pleasure and a strong desire for replication.

It's a perpetual cycle of unfulfillment and grasping at the wind. Even more so as our fleshly bodies and their cravings will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven (1 Cor 15:50; 2 Cor 4:18). This life and its struggles, including the struggle to find meaning "under the sun" will pale in significance to what will be our eternal experience (Rom 8:18).

While at the moment many of these things are good and even great experiences, great accomplishments, and even great acquisitions, they still leave a void (Vs. 4-11) (Lk 12:15). To the unfortunate reality that after all of his architectural and agricultural endeavors, acquiring servants and possessions, the pursuit of "anything goes", he still eventually came away empty.

Feeling good for the moment is one thing (Prov 17:22). The greater challenge is pursuing life experiences that are more profitable than they are comforting or satisfying. His experience is that there was nothing to gain from the labors "under the sun", nothing that made any real difference in the big picture of life beyond this world.

We too will eventually come to admit that experiencing temporary joy in these things does not produce the inner satisfaction we are searching for. When that emptiness and void deep within continues to gnaw at our inner being we have to learn to hasten to the one who has designed us with a void that only He can fill (Ps 42:1; 63:1-8).

THE TAKE-HOME:

1. What do we need to realize about the Preacher before we start thinking that he never experienced the kind of things we do, as we search for meaning (2:10-11)?
2. What knowledge or wisdom have you pursued that you wish you hadn't because it only grieved you more that you couldn't do as much about it? What have you done since then?
3. If the Preacher had dedicated himself to activities that he concluded were vain, how could he properly say that he acted in wisdom in all this (2:9)? What do we do in vain out of our own earthly wisdom?
4. In 1:4-11 Solomon paints a picture of a cycle of monotony where we all just go through the motions, and nothing happens. What are things that you engage in that seem monotonous or unending?