

Puzzling Pointlessness, Pleasure and Philosophy

We open the book of Ecclesiastes, which is the ultimate guide to what life is about, and we remember that Solomon is going to speak in two voices in this book. He is going to speak in the voice of the one who goads us with disturbing reflections from an atheistic point of view, and the voice of one who nails down some tent-pegs of Divine revelation that we can settle under and find shade.

So picture yourself settling down to your first lecture with Solomon on what life is about.

The Brutal Conclusion 1:2-11

Solomon is no ear-tickling prophet who tells you what you want to hear. Solomon doesn't wait to lead you down the path to his conclusion. He swills his cup, swallows, sets it down and says to you: here is the meaning of life: ***Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*** That's the second verse of the whole book.

He begins his conversation with a conclusion. In fact, the book has two conclusions. It begins with a conclusion and it ends with a conclusion. The conclusion of the beginning is the conclusion of life under the sun, life lived by a secularist. It is the goading conclusion. You're going to hear Solomon say 'under the sun' numerous times, and it is his way of saying – life lived as if there is nothing and no one above us. All that there is, is what the sun shines on – just physical, material life – no God, no eternity, no spirit, no final judgement. That's life under the sun.

This is the life of the atheist. Whether it is the theoretical atheist who says, I don't believe in God, or whether it is the practical atheist who says, God doesn't make any difference to my life; I don't care if there is a God, either way – Solomon is going to take such people to the necessary conclusion of life lived that way. Solomon says – life lived like that is vanity.

What does he mean – vanity of vanities? The word in the Hebrew suggests emptiness, weightlessness, pointlessness. It's the nearest thing to zero. Solomon says, add up all that life is, all that man does, all the paths he takes, all the goals he pursues, all he achieves, take all of human life all through history and put on the scale, and the needle doesn't even wobble. Life is utterly pointless. Through this book, he is going to say this about human wisdom, pleasure, property, wealth, work, success, youth, rivalry, power, human achievement, and human religion.

The Hebrew word also means frustrating, mysterious, incomprehensible. All of human life presents us with a mystery we cannot solve, problems which don't have answers.

And the conclusion is – life is pointless, and life is puzzling. Life will not satisfy you, nor will you ever find out why. No satisfaction, no solution – and yet satisfaction and solutions are what you will want your whole life.

Now in verses 3 to 11, he gives you the big picture of why life lived under the sun is pointless and puzzling.

Ecclesiastes 1:3-8 *What profit has a man from all his labor In which he toils under the sun? ⁴ One generation passes away, and another generation comes; But the earth abides forever. ⁵ The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose. ⁶ The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit. ⁷ All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; To the place from which the rivers come, There they return again. ⁸ All things are full of labor; Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing.*

What profit, what gain does man actually get out of life?

Before we regard this question as mercenary, recall that Jesus asked a very similar question:

Matthew 16:26 *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"*

Because, here's the thing – no matter what you do, you still die.

Solomon tells us that creation keeps reminding us that man is temporary, but nature just keeps on ticking. The sun rises and sets, the wind blows and comes back, the river runs into the sea, evaporation takes places, and the cycle of creation goes on and on. This is the backdrop against which we live – a creation which seemingly mindlessly keeps on doing its thing, not progressing, just continuing. The sea doesn't fill up, the earth doesn't reach a goal – it's just a tedious, monotonous repetition that never ends, and we're stuck here, reminded that we're going to die.

All these cycles goad us – this is still going to be here in a hundred years, and I won't – so what's the point? What's the point of doing anything, if in the end, that's it? If death is the same end for rich and poor, smart and simple, powerful and oppressed, then why try to be one over the other?

The earth just keeps being here and being here, while you die. You don't really make a big splash. Life is brief. You can build your sandcastles on the beach, but the tide is going to come and wash them away.

So Solomon says in verse 8 – all things are wearisome. When you look at life under the sun, it is actually boring, it's tiresome. It doesn't satisfy. Sin is first novelty, then drudgery, then slavery. It loses its satisfaction and becomes part of the tedium.

And it's this kind of bored, tired living that makes the world look to the future to change things. The future will bring the answers. There'll be new discoveries, new advancements, new technologies, and new arrangements! This will solve the apparent emptiness of life, and this will make it all make sense.

Solomon says – no, it's never really new.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 *That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us.*

Don't expect something different in the future. The same cycles will continue. What has been done, what has been, is what will be, just with a twist. Don't set your hope in novelty. There is no real novelty. Oh, there might be new gadgets and new technologies, but they never change the meaning of human life. They never answer the questions, they just postpone them. With 3000 years between us, have we really answered Solomon's questions? The fact that what he says still resonates with us just proves the point! There is nothing new. It's the same cycle of life.

To the atheist living under the sun, Solomon whispers, Welcome to the rest of your life. It's not going to get any better than this. And just as the godless person is swallowing hard at this bitter news, Solomon gives the knockout blow:

¹¹ *There is no remembrance of former things, Nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.*

The past will be forgotten. Eventually the future will be in the past and will also be forgotten. The

present is all you have, but now it is pointless, wearying, unsatisfying— so what's the point of living at all?

So that's his goading conclusion. Life is an endless cycle, and we die, without making much difference at all. Worse, you can't change it.

Ecclesiastes 1:14-15 *I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be numbered.*

You can't fix what you don't like, and you can't count up what isn't there – you can't figure it out! You can't change the pointlessness of it all, and you can't tally it up and come to an answer either.

In that case, life is pointless and puzzling, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

Solomon Gears Up To Find Answers v12-13; 16-17

Now, at some point, Solomon decided to pick himself up off the floor of depression and test life out for satisfaction, and solutions. He was uniquely placed, as we've already seen, to examine life for what it might hold. So Solomon was going to be the scientist in the white lab coat doing experiments and writing down his observations. But he was also going to be the test tube and the Bunsen burner and the stuff inside. His own life was the experiment. So he decided to test life on himself and watch the reactions.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-13 *the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised.*

This is the only time that God is mentioned in the goading of chapter 1, and you will notice it is a view of God that seems to make Him almost hard. God gives man this grievous, miserable, unhappy existence.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18 *I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.*

He decided to find the answers. Solomon gathered all his resources, and began the search for life's meaning.

The Search for Satisfaction in Pleasure

Ecclesiastes 2:1-2 *I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter -- "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?"*

The two words translated laughter and mirth represents two kinds of joy in Hebrew. One is the frivolous, crazy, hilarious kind of party-joy, and the other is the more considered, careful, cultured joys. His conclusion – party happiness, madness. Civilised happiness – what good does it do? In verse 3, we find out that he indulged his body with wine, while still being guided by wisdom. He didn't lose himself in the experiment. He was still experimenting and watching.

In verse 4, we find out that he tried to find pleasure in building, architecture, interior decorating. Building and design became his hobby.

In verse 5 and 6 we find out that he sought pleasure in horticulture, farming, landscaping – finding beauty in nature and taming nature for pleasure. He built massive reservoirs to hold the water to supply his gardens.

In verses 7 and 8 we find out that he looked for pleasure in materialism. He bought all kinds of goods and services – servant, employees, herds, flocks, farms, silver and gold, collectors' items, special goods only obtainable by the rich and elite,

The middle of verse 8 tells us that he looked for pleasure in music, the arts and culture, providing for himself the best in what we would call entertainment. The end of verse 8, translated 'musical instruments' can be translated concubines which would confirm what we read in I Kings – Solomon sought pleasure in sexuality.

In verse 9 we find out that he was offered pleasure in his fame and power, and it didn't go to his head either. His wisdom stayed with him.

So here comes the description of the Big Experiment in verse 10:

Ecclesiastes 2:10 *Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, For my heart rejoiced in all my labor; And this was my reward from all my labor.*

And the findings?

Ecclesiastes 2:11 *Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.*

This was the morning after the night before. And the emotional hangover was not pretty. He felt spent, guilty, and empty. When the party is over, the reality sinks in – did this really satisfy?

There was a disturbed patient who consulted a psychiatrist for help. He was suffering from deep depression. Nothing he had tried could help. He woke up discouraged and blue, and the condition worsened as the day progressed. Now he was desperate; he couldn't go on this way. Before he left the office, the psychiatrist told him about a show in one of the local theaters. It featured an Italian clown who had the audience convulsed with laughter night after night. The doctor recommended that his patient attend the show, that it would be excellent therapy to laugh for a couple of hours and forget his troubles. Just go and see the Italian clown! With a defeated expression, the patient looked into the doctor's eyes and said, "I am that clown."

It was as pointless as trying to grab the wind in your hands. He gained nothing. It was pointless and puzzling. The laughter was insanity. The happiness didn't benefit.

Beverly Hills, California (the home of Hollywood stars), has more psychiatrists per square mile than any other community in the world. It has 193 psychiatrists—one for every 171 residents.

So he turned to philosophy.

The Search for Solutions in Worldly Philosophy

Ecclesiastes 2:12 ¶ *Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; For what can the man do who succeeds the king? -- Only what he has already done.*

The opposite! You go from hedonism to rationalism. If I can't find it in the hot waters of passion and appetite, I will look for it the cold waters of logic and analysis and rational thinking.

Now we know that the kind of wisdom Solomon was turning to was still the wisdom under the sun. We know that because he always tells us that the true beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and He is not in the picture here. So what he is turning to is the best reasoning and reflection that a godless man can do. The best meditation and philosophy that man can come up with is what he pursued. He's looking for answers.

He knew that reflection is better than none.

Ecclesiastes 2:13-14 *Then I saw that wisdom excels folly As light excels darkness. ¹⁴ The wise man's eyes are in his head, But the fool walks in darkness.*

At least the man who thinks about life and tries to figure it out is seeing things. His eyes are in his head.

But pretty soon, the problems stack up.

1) Worldly wisdom makes you more aware of life's problems without any answers.

Ecclesiastes 1:18 *For in much wisdom is much grief, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

The man who reflects on the puzzles and pains of life, without any revelation from God, will very soon come to depression. Reflection without revelation is deeply painful.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a twentieth century philosopher who was the ultimate life under the sun man. He wrote: Man is a useless passion...everything that exists is born for no reason, carries on living through weakness, and dies by accident."

When he died, his last words were simply "I failed".

2) Wise people die just like fools.

Ecclesiastes 2:14 *Yet I myself perceived That the same event happens to them all.*

Ecclesiastes 2:15-16 *So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity." ¹⁶ For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!*

So you go to all the trouble of trying to work out what life is about. You see the problems and the puzzles more clearly. You don't solve them, but you know more of life than the fool does. And then you die. Just like the fool. If the destination is the same for all of us, what difference does it make what we do on the journey? It means the whole thing is nonsense! If I am on an aeroplane, reading Plato and Aristotle, and the man next to me is reading The National Enquirer, what difference does it make if the plane is about to crash?

3) Wise people must leave all their work to fools.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 *Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.*

Ecclesiastes 2:21 *For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.*

If I spend all day pushing a car uphill, and manage to get it 100 metros up a gentle slope, all my work means nothing if the next day someone gets in, releases the handbrake and rolls it back. Solomon says – I spend my life on wisdom, ruling by wisdom, and the one who comes after me might undo all of it with foolishness. So what's the profit? What's the gain?

So what's the point of philosophy, knowledge, rationalism? You can see the problems clearer, but you don't have solutions; you end up dying just like the fool who never thought about them, and when you do die, a fool takes over from you – as if you were never there.

Here are two very painful goads: pleasure doesn't satisfy, and human wisdom doesn't solve anything.

So what do you do if you are living for life under the sun, and you find out that pleasure doesn't satisfy, and human reason doesn't solve anything? You despair.

Ecclesiastes 2:17 *Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

Ecclesiastes 2:20 *Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 *For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? ²³ For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.*

Do you know what despair is? It is sorrow, without hope. It is the pain of sensing, life is under a curse. This world which offers so much, returns so little. This world which has so much evidence of intelligent design, keeps returning nonsensical answers. That stings. That hurts. You didn't ask to be born, but here you are. You didn't ask to desire pleasure, but you want it and can't get it. You didn't ask to want to understand things, but you have that desire, but there are no answers, under the sun.

A person who sits and thinks about this long enough will despair. And they are meant to. They are not meant to run from the brutal conclusions. They are not meant to escape or medicate or forget these conclusions.

Nor are they meant to sit on them and lose hope.

The Shepherd's Solution: Enjoy Life as a Gift

Solomon goads you to move. He wants to move you to his first nail – his first tent-peg. Here comes an in-breaking of divine revelation. Here comes the first glimpse of a view from above the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 *Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? ²⁶ For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

Here is the truth: Life is meant to be enjoyed. Nothing is better for a man than that his soul should enjoy good. God made the world to be enjoyed. When he finished creation, the Word says, “**Genesis 1:31** *Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.*”

Even in our fallen state, life is to be enjoyed.

1 Timothy 4:4 *For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;*

But here is the hinge on which everything swings. The enjoyment of life is **a gift** from God. "From the hand of God" "For God gives...joy"

Verse 25 should probably be translated this way:

“ Ecclesiastes 2:25 For who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from Him? (NIV, NAS, ESV)

Here is what the Bible is saying: you can get all the gifts you like, but if you don't have the Giver, the gifts won't make sense and they won't satisfy. We think that the things will bring joy and satisfy us. The Bible says the joy is not automatic. The joy is a separate gift.

Why do you think that God would make joy a separate gift? Why would God give us gifts which hold out the promise of satisfaction, but actually do nothing but torment you unless you get the gift of joy from Him? Because God will not have his gifts become the idols of our hearts. He will not share His glory with His gifts. He will not allow the gifts to function if they are divorced from him.

God gives the gift, but He will not grant the satisfaction unless you come to Him dependently for it. Like Jim Berg said, you can gather all the toys you like, but God holds the batteries. And unless you please Him, none of them will work.

God is not mocked. You cannot live in His world, tread on his earth, breathe His air, live by His permission, pursue His gifts, and then ignore Him and think it will all work out. Do that, and life is vanity. Martin Lloyd-Jones said, 'Worldliness is anything that tries to satisfy us outside of God'

Jim Berg talked about the equation of enjoyment which is this: Whatever things or gifts you obtain you put on this side of the equation. You then multiply them by God's contribution – and the result is the amount of enjoyment. So if you gather up 1 million gifts on this side, and multiply them by 0, what is the result? Zero enjoyment. If God does not grant joy, then it doesn't matter how much stuff you have. Anything multiplied by zero is zero.

Too many Christians are busy asking God to help them add stuff to their side of the equation. God help me make more money; help me to get better marks; help me get this promotion; help me get this degree; help me make more friends. But God is not going to help us get more toys unless we will ask Him for the batteries. That is, unless we will rejoice in Him.

1 Timothy 6:17 *Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy... but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

The sinner has the lot of simply laying up stuff for the righteous and losing it in the end, which is a waste of your life, Solomon says.

Solomon's goads and pricks us. Life is pointless. Pleasure doesn't satisfy. Life is a puzzle and philosophy doesn't solve it. And in the end, you die and you haven't changed anything, and people after you reverse what you have done. And this is the way it has been, and always will be.

But if you will acknowledge God, then you will see that life is not cruel. Life is actually designed to delight the humble. It yields sweet fruits to those who come to God on His terms. You come to God and make right with Him, through His Son Jesus Christ. You seek forgiveness for sins and a right standing with Him. You seek to live and honour and please Him. You acknowledge Him as the ultimate end of your actions, the ultimate Joy of all. When you do this, God is delighted to not only

give you the gifts, but to grant you satisfaction with those gifts, knowing that you are ultimately satisfied in Him.

God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in Him - in Him, not merely through Him. When we are satisfied in God, God is happy to pour on the joys of life – because each one causes more rejoicing in Him.