Lesson 2

Pg. 25-36

LESSON 2

SORTING OUT YOUR LIFE

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

In this lesson we discover what does and does not satisfy in this life.

OUTLINE

People everywhere want to live a meaningful life; the question becomes how to find it. Some seek it in pleasure, some in knowledge, some in self-indulgence, some in work, and others in material things. Solomon discovered that meaning is found in none of those pursuits.

I. The Experiences of Life Under the Sun
- A. Searching for Meaning in Wisdom
- B. Searching for Meaning in Wild Living
- C. Searching for Meaning in Work
- D. Searching for Meaning in Wealth

II. The Evaluation of Life Under the Sun
- A. Man's Work Does Not Satisfy Him
- B. Man's Work Does Not Separate Him
- C. Man's Work Does Not Succeed Him

III. The Enjoyment of Life Under the Sun
- A. True Enjoyment Is a Gift From God
- B. True Enlightenment Is a Gift From God

OVERVIEW

We learned in the first lesson in this study that Solomon is near the end of his life, looking back over his shoulder, recounting his fruitless search for meaning and purpose apart from God. Three key words tell the story of his search: "vanity," meaning emptiness or uselessness; "under the sun," referring to life in this world apart from God; and "profit," meaning that which is left over.

The Experiences of Life Under the Sun

In this section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon examines his search for meaning from four perspectives: wisdom, wild living, work, and wealth.

Searching for Meaning in Wisdom

A while back, Dr. James Dobson recounted the story of a teenage girl in Fremont, California, who achieved a perfect score on her SATs and a perfect score on the University of California acceptance tests—the first person ever to do so. She was a straight-A student in high school who considered herself a typical teenager. But her teachers called her Wonder Woman because of her studious habits and photographic memory. In an interview with a reporter, when she was asked, "What is the meaning of life?" she replied, "I have no idea. I would like to know myself."

Here was a brilliant, educated teenager whose great learning had not produced the meaning of life. The late philosopher and author, Dr. Frances Schaeffer, said, "The damnation of this generation is that it doesn't know that it has any meaning at all." Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said, "For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:18).

If education could bring meaning and purpose in life, then people with Ph.D.s would be the happiest, most fulfilled people in the world. Education, even wisdom, is not the source of meaning and purpose in life.

Searching for Meaning in Wild Living

Next, Solomon tells about trying to find meaning through pleasure and self-indulgent living. Given Solomon's wealth and

the peace that Israel enjoyed during his reign as king, he had plenty of opportunity to seek meaning in wild living.

1. He Tried Amusement

   Solomon tried amusement, mirth, pleasure, and laughter, but found them all wanting: "Madness! . . . What does it accomplish?" (2:2) He was trying to make happiness an end in itself, which is a futile endeavor. In Proverbs 14:13 he wrote, "Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief."

   We can imagine Solomon's royal palace being like a Las Vegas hotel during this period, filled with a "bright lights, big city" atmosphere. Many today have tried what Solomon tried—to dull the ache of meaninglessness through wanton living. And they have found what he found: There is no meaning in amusement.

2. He Tried Alcohol

   Solomon didn't become an alcoholic or a drunkard. He kept his senses about him so he could record his experiments with wine and pleasure. But even after incorporating alcohol into his pursuit for meaning, he discovered it, too, was a vain pursuit. His stomach might have been full, but his heart was still empty.

Searching for Meaning in Work

Wisdom and wild living didn't change Solomon's life, so he decided to throw himself into his work. In verses 4-6 Solomon uses the pronoun "I," "my," or "myself" ten times. All the building programs he undertook—houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards—were oriented around his own need to find meaning. But they turned out to have little effect.

When I returned recently to the college where my father invested fifty years as president and chancellor, I discovered that the current and retiring president had overseen the building of a hundred million dollars of new facilities on the campus. While those new buildings will ably serve students and faculty and the community, there is no ultimate meaning attached to them. They are just bricks and mortar that will crumble in time. Unless buildings are linked to the glory of God (which those at Cedarville College are), they are only monuments to man with no eternal significance. Solomon discovered that work projects, unless done for God, do not bring lasting meaning.

Work has meaning in the short term, but not in an eternal sense. Work is a means to an end, not an end in itself. We cannot work or build enough to fill the eternal shape of the human heart.

When Ernest Hemingway, one of the twentieth century's most famous authors, died, he left a sad suicide note. After having lived a life full of every adventure one could imagine, this "man's man" concluded, "Life is just one [bad] thing after another." Solomon would probably have agreed with Hemingway.

We can find people throughout history who have sought meaning through accomplishments. Old Testament commentator Derek Kidner has identified the problem with such a strategy: "What spoils the pleasures of life for us is our hunger to get out of them more than they can ever deliver." Work was not designed by God to be an ultimate source of meaning.

Searching for Meaning in Wealth

Solomon's last target for finding meaning was in his vast wealth, which he had more of than anyone else in the world. Solomon's wealth, in today's dollar amounts, would have been staggering (1 Kings 10:14). Solomon's drinking goblets and the vessels in his house were all made of pure gold. Solomon had so much gold that silver was considered inferior (1 Kings 10:21). Rulers from all the world sent him tributes of gold and other forms of wealth, and his own fleet of trading ships brought back treasures from other lands. Solomon's palace and personal life dripped with the accouterments of wealth.

Solomon would have agreed with a writer in *The Wall Street Journal:* "[Money is] an article which may be used [as a] universal passport to everywhere except heaven and a universal provider of everything except happiness."

Cecil Rhodes left England, went to South Africa at age 27 and founded the DeBeers Mining Company. He soon controlled the entire South African diamond industry and became Prime Minister at age 36. Probably the richest man in the world at the time of his death, Rhodes was also a close personal friend of General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. On one occasion, General Booth asked Rhodes, "Tell me, man, are you happy?" Rhodes looked at Booth and said, "Happy? Me? Good heavens, no!"

Solomon and Rhodes both learned that a life lived without reference to God is empty regardless of how much money you have.

The Evaluation of Life Under the Sun

Solomon makes three evaluations of the experiments he pursued with wisdom, wild living, work, and wealth.

Man's Work Does Not Satisfy Him

Verses 11-12 summarize Solomon's conclusion that work doesn't fill the bill. Man was created by God to be satisfied by God, and no amount of counterfeit efforts to find meaning in life will be successful. In all his works, "there was no profit under the sun" (2:11).

Man's Work Does Not Separate Him

Solomon makes a subtle argument in verses 13-16, and it is this: You never see a U-Haul trailer attached to a hearse. When you die, everything you have done and accumulated stays right here. You can't take it with you.

Regardless of whether you've been wise or foolish in life, there is no separation between the two at death if there is no God. If this life under the sun is all there is, then there is no difference between the wise and the foolish. We all die and that's all there is.

Man's Work Does Not Succeed Him

Solomon's third evaluation is that man's work does not succeed him. What you do in this life stays in this life when you die. You have no control over who gets the benefit of all you've done.

Solomon is driving stakes into the ego of man in these verses; he is pulling the rug out from under us. All that we think we have done that is great is forgotten at death. When you die, all your work—your money, your bank accounts, your resources—is turned over to somebody else to manage. You did the work and someone else reaps the rewards. Death is the leveler that brings us back to reality: None of our work has lasting significance unless it is tied to the glory of God in some way. But work for work's sake is meaningless and vain.

Our goal as Christians is to set our affections on things above, not things on this earth.

The Enjoyment of Life Under the Sun

Solomon discovers that part of the meaning of life is to live and enjoy it as a gift from God.

True Enjoyment Is a Gift From God

A better translation of verse 25 is, "Who can eat, or who can have enjoyment without God?" We can try to find pleasure in life without God, but ultimately we can't.

Eight times in Ecclesiastes Solomon makes reference to eating and drinking and enjoying life. His point is that we need to understand life under the sun for what it is and not confuse it with what it's not. It's not the ultimate, but it is something that can be enjoyed as a gift from God. Solomon doesn't translate his inability to find ultimate meaning in life into a dark morbidity about life. He says enjoy it to the extent it is enjoyable. While true and permanent joy is found only in God, life offers a measure of enjoyment of which we should not be afraid to take advantage.

Solomon does away with the idea that God is some kind of cosmic kill-joy. When we seek ultimate joy in this world, we don't find it; but when we learn to enjoy this world that God has created, everything comes into proper perspective. If you are a person who believes God is against your enjoying life, you need to adopt Solomon's perspective. Life can be a great source of joy when we learn to view it against the backdrop of God who created life and gives it as a gift to His creation.

Whatever God has given you in life, hold it with an open hand. Allow God to take from your hand to bless others and to give back to your hand even more than you have. View life as a gift from God, and you will learn to enjoy it under His direction and blessing (1 Timothy 6:17). God is not like drugs or alcohol where you have to take more to continue to get pleasure or stimulus. Instead of being increasingly dissatisfied with God, you are increasingly satisfied the better you get to know Him and the more you enjoy His gifts.

True Enlightenment Is a Gift From God

I know two families, both of whom own beautiful homes. One family just hoards their house. They hardly use it for fear of marring its perfection. It is an idol of sorts to them. The other family is constantly trying to think of how to use their house for the glory of God. They constantly have missionaries staying with them and use

it for other ministry functions. The latter family seems to really enjoy their house while the first family doesn't. Enlightenment about the use of God's gifts and the enjoyment of life comes from God.

Solomon says that to some, God gives the work of "gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God." We can either be the gatherer and collector or the one who is receiving the gifts. There is work and blessing being stored up for the righteous as a gift from God (Proverbs 13:22). Someone asked me once whether, if they won the lottery, they should give part of the money to God. First I told them they shouldn't be using God's money to gamble on the lottery, but if they did come into a large sum of money such as from the lottery, of course they should give part to God! That's a perfect illustration of how money is transferred by God to accomplish His purposes.

There is a way to have joy and fulfillment in life, but it won't be found in this world. It will be found in the God who made this world and gives it to us as a gift to enjoy.

Isaiah 55:1-3 summarizes this section of Ecclesiastes well:

> Ho! Everyone who thirsts,
> Come to the waters;
> And you who have no money,
> Come, buy and eat.
> Yes, come, buy wine and milk
> Without money and without price.
> Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
> And your wages for what does not satisfy?
> Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
> And let your soul delight itself in abundance.
> Incline your ear, and come to Me.
> Hear, and your soul shall live;
> And I will make an everlasting covenant with you—
> The sure mercies of David.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. What does Solomon say doesn't satisfy in life? What does?

   a. Have you ever tried to find meaning in the experiences discussed in this lesson? What was the outcome?

   b. If you were to look back on your life, what words would you use to describe it?

   c. How can you invest in your eternal future?

2. In his earlier years, Solomon wrote about the benefits of wisdom in Proverbs. Note the benefits of wisdom as found in the following passages:

   a. 3:13-15

   b. 3:16

   c. 3:17-18

d. 4:7-9

e. 8:32-36

f. What is the difference between how Solomon discusses wisdom in Proverbs and how he portrays it in Ecclesiastes?

g. What is the proper context for wisdom, knowledge, and education in life?

h. Is it better to be uneducated and fear God or be educated and not fear God? Why? (see Proverbs 1:7; 9:10)

3. What did Solomon seek meaning through in the following verses? Do any of these parallel with your life? Elaborate.

   a. Ecclesiastes 2:1-2

   b. Proverbs 14:13

   c. Ecclesiastes 2:3

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How do the experiences Solomon seeks parallel with what our society teaches about finding happiness? Use specific examples.

   a. How can we use the insight given us in this lesson to reach those who are chasing their purpose in the wrong places?

2. With bills to pay and a family to feed, chasing money can easily become the main priority in our lives. Discuss how we can seek to have enough money for our families while not putting an ungodly amount of value on riches and material goods.

   a. Does living a godly life mean you cannot enjoy things of this life? Explain.

   b. How does 1 Timothy 6:17 serve as an encouragement for us?

3. Read 1 Timothy 6:17 and discuss the following questions:

   a. What is the purpose of all God has given to us?

b. At what point does wealth become a problem?

c. How can one integrate wealth into a lifestyle of joy in God?

4. What do you learn about joy from Acts 13:49-52?

a. What would the world's perspective on the situation be?

b. In what context does Paul describe joy in Romans 14:17?

c. What examples of worldly pursuits does he cite as not being the source of joy?

d. Who is the source of true joy in Romans 15:13?

e. What striking contrast do you find concerning joy in 2 Corinthians 8:2?

f. Who is the source of joy in 1 Thessalonians 1:6?

g. How do these Scriptures tie in to our lesson today?

DID YOU KNOW?

The two primary names for God in the Old Testament are the words *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. *Elohim* is a Hebrew word that doesn't refer specifically to the God of Israel but to gods of any sort. *Yahweh,* however, is the personal name of Israel's God, first revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:13-15). Solomon's spiritual deterioration can be tracked from his writing of Proverbs, where he referred to God by His personal name, *Yahweh,* more than 80 times, to Ecclesiastes where he doesn't use *Yahweh* at all. Instead, in Ecclesiastes, Solomon refers to God by the non-personal name, *Elohim.*