


Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 3:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 2</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:12-17</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, January 27, 2013</i>


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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:1-9</i>

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key

 = Teacher Information

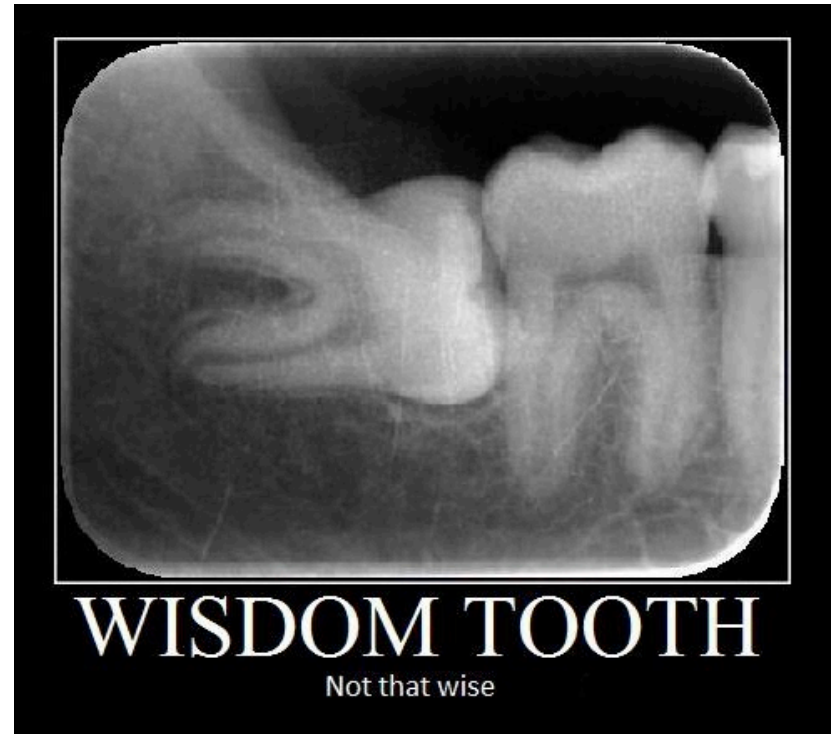
 = Discussion Starter

 **TEACHING TIP**

In this lesson, the main “meat” is in the first point, with the second and third providing some simple additional considerations on the topic. Therefore, you may have some time to finish up any uncovered material from last week, before you jump into this week’s lesson.

I’ve been struggling to creatively suggest some good discussion starters for each lesson in this series so far. With that in mind, feel free to incorporate other opportunities for interaction.

INTRODUCTION



Wisdom Teeth are so-called, because they usually appear between the ages of 17 and 25, when an individual is entering adulthood and thus assumedly getting wiser. These particular molars, however, are usually anything but wise. Approximately 10,000,000 wisdom teeth are extracted each year in the United States, with roughly 70% of people undergoing such a procedure. This is due to a problem called “impaction,” which occurs when the tooth begins to grow in sideways, either angling forward, backward, or horizontally into the tooth beside it. So, while these teeth may appear during one’s growth in wisdom, they themselves seem behind the curve.

In the passage to which we turn this morning, the Teacher is going to suggest that, oftentimes, the same seems to be true with wisdom itself—that is, sometimes it’s actually less “wise” and beneficial than it’s promoted to be (cf. 2:15b, 17b). While it offers pithy maxims, applicable principles, healthy warnings, and sagacious promises, wisdom—both spoken and lived—sometimes seems insignificant, at best, or inaccurate, at worst.

Solomon is indeed a qualified Teacher for this topic. Even before God endowed him with “a wise and an understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:7-13), David recognized the wisdom of his son (1 Kings 2:6, 9). His wisdom, encapsulated in books and songs (1 Kings 4:32; cf. Psalm 72, 127; Proverbs; Song of Solomon), was more than just theoretical; it was practical and public (1 Kings 3:16-28), drawing to him people from all over the world (1 Kings 4:29-34; 10:1-9, 23-24). “Solomon’s use of the term [wisdom], in typical Hebrew fashion, is more practical than philosophical and implies more than knowledge. It carries notions of ability for proper behavior, success, common sense, and wit.”¹ Today, this wisdom is offered to us from motivational speakers, psychologists and psychiatrists, life coaches, philosophers, and self-help books and seminars, to name a few sources.

It is no surprise that, when Solomon began his quest for significance and meaning “under the sun,” he started with wisdom. This is what he knew best and apparently found some alleviation and benefit from. But when drawn to its extent, when

applied with black and white regularity, when tested by the reality of a cyclical and unpredictable existence, could it render true and satisfactory hope?

In two different sections, Solomon is going to answer that question, and his answer continues to support his overarching verdict that **life merely lived “under the sun” is futile**—including the profession and practice of wisdom. Before we consider his words on wisdom, let’s first remind ourselves where they fall within the larger context:

- ~~the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)~~
- ~~the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)~~
- **the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)**
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-23)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-9)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-9)
- the finiteness of humanity (6:10-12)

This morning, we’ll trace three aspects of wisdom “under the sun” that remind us of its limitations.

THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM SEEN IN ITS CONCLUSIONS (1:12-15)

Verse 13 pictures Solomon launching into a rigorous season of research (which research ultimately provided his expressions in 1:1-11). The phrase “gave my heart” indicates a surrendering to such an investigation. In other words, he affirms that he got serious, made it his pursuit, determined in his heart, and applied his mind to his research.

The words “to seek and search out” are synonyms that reiterate the seriousness and thoroughness of his study. Together, they refer to an “investigation” (cf. Deuteronomy 19:16-19; Psalm 111:2) to “discover” (Numbers 13:2) the truth about life. Clearly, Solomon leaves no stone unturned in his analysis. His quest leads him to three insufficient conclusions about life.

1. *Life is difficult (vv. 12-13).*

After thoughtfully examining all of man's achievements "under the sun" (v. 13a), Solomon concludes, first, that "this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith" (v. 13b). Literally, the verse employs redundancy to express this difficulty: "It is a burdensome task that God has given to the sons of man to be tasked with it."

The phrase "sore travail" or "burdensome task" (also used in 1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2, 13; 8:10) has been translated in a variety of ways—"burdensome task" (NET), "rotten business" (NET notes), "sore travail" (KJV, ASV), "sad travail" (YLT), "painful occupation" (Douay), "sorry business" (NEB), "sorry task" (Moffatt), "thankless task" (NAB), "grievous task" (NASB), "unhappy business" (ESV), "trying task" (MLB), "unhappy business" (RSV, NRSV, NJPS), and "heavy burden" (NIV).

Ultimately, this "task" or "business" refers to "mankind's restlessness and vigour [sic] in the quest for meaning...It points to the sense of compulsion behind the quest. Mankind thinks and plans. This he can scarcely avoid, for he wants to understand where his life is going. This is the burden which, by God's decree, every man bears: the problem of life is no optional hobby."²

The phrase "hath God given" can be translated as "to set, allow, appoint, ordain" (cf. Genesis 20:6; 31:7; Exodus 3:19; Numbers 20:21; 21:23; Jeremiah 1:15). Solomon is suggesting that behind life's difficulty lies the sovereign decree of God (cf. 3:10-11; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; cf. Romans 8:20), the existence of whom his wisdom apparently confirms rather than denies. Here, Solomon is actually hinting at the actual answer, even while lamenting the problem.³



What is the answer? See paragraph below, as well as under subpoints 2 and 3 below.

At the core is "a lack of harmony between common human aspirations and the very nature of reality itself,"⁴ between what we want the world to be and how God has ordained it to be (cf. Romans 8:20; 1 Corinthians 3:19). This is further (and yet still only implicitly) corroborated in verse 15.



Share a personal experience in which your view of life's difficulties was exacerbated because, in your wisdom, you failed to rehearse and believe in the sovereignty and purposes of God? open discussion

2. *Life is insoluble (v. 15).*

This is where wisdom is supposed to enter and solve the day, providing an answer to the difficulties of life. But this, affirms the Researcher, wisdom is unable to do. He writes, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered."

These "crooked" and "wanting" things refer to "twists (*what is crooked*) and gaps (*what is lacking*) in all thinking [i.e., 'leaps of logic or gaps in data'⁵]. No matter how the thinker ponders, he cannot straighten out life's anomalies, nor reduce all he sees to a neat system."⁶ Having hinted at the reason for these twists and gaps in verse 13, Solomon leaves it alone here, but states it again in 7:13—"Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked?" Since God is ultimately incomprehensible and His ways, inscrutable, wisdom "under the sun" is seen to be limited in that its conclusion bemoans a real problem without a satisfactory solution (cf. 7:29).⁷



Can you remember a situation in life that left you stymied, no matter how you tried to view it or solve it? Can you think of a time when no matter what you did or how well you tried to handle a situation, it still seemed to “blow up in your face”? *open discussion*

These are evidences of this “burdensome task” that God has appointed to us. These situations remind us that our perspective and understanding “under the sun” is greatly limited; our wisdom is deficient.

3. *Life is frustrating (v. 14).*

The first two points lead to a third, summarized in verse 14—“I have seen all the works [or accomplishments] that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” Devoid of the answer that Solomon has hinted at (i.e., living in the fear of God who has ordained all things with eternal purpose), the scholar and sage “under the sun” only find “futility.” Like a child who “chases the wind,” he is unable to attain satisfying answers.



What systems of philosophical thought demonstrate to a believing reader the frustrating futility of wisdom “under the sun”? *See paragraph below.*

Rationalism (i.e., proposes that all knowledge can be gained by the power of our reason alone), Empiricism (i.e., proposes that all knowledge has to come through the senses, from experience”), and Existentialism (i.e., rejects the belief that life has an inherent meaning, but instead requires each individual to posit his or her own subjective values)⁸ have been birthed from this futility, and together they remind us that the wisdom of man “under the sun” is limited.⁹

Application/Realization: In Colossians 2:4, we learned that “in [Christ] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” 1 Corinthians 1:30 reiterates that Christ “is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” This

Wisdom is the answer to life’s investigations—its difficulties, questions, and frustrations. The Wisdom that is Jesus is needed to relate this world to the next, the seen to the unseen, life’s problems to heaven’s promises. Only in the gospel (i.e., everything Jesus is, everything Jesus says, and everything Jesus does) is the tension between our aspirations and true reality harmonized through our relationship to the One who is working all things after the counsel of His own will (cf. Ephesians 1:11) for a specific, good, and eternal purpose (Romans 8:28). That is wisdom indeed, which wisdom we should rest in, for only Jesus can and will make the crooked straight (Isaiah 40:4; 42:16; 45:2; Luke 1:37; 3:5; Philippians 2:15)!

Transition: The limitations of wisdom “under the sun” are on display for all to see when its conclusions are evaluated and deemed deficient. Secondly, wisdom’s limitations are evidenced in its application.


THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM SEEN IN ITS APPLICATION (1:16-18)

1. *His possession of wisdom (v. 16).*

Solomon speaks more autobiographically in the next paragraph as he depicts his unprecedented possession of wisdom. In fact, even in verse 12, he alluded to the advantage he had over others. As “king over Israel in Jerusalem,” Solomon had access to records and people that may have been otherwise unavailable (cf. 1 Kings 4:34; 10:1, 8-10), as he researched life through the lens of wisdom (v. 13). Thus, we know that his quest was aided by comprehensive and diligent knowledge.


In verses 16-18, Solomon further convinces us that his wisdom surpassed all others. We read as much in 1 Kings 4:31, and in our text, Solomon attests, “I am come to great estate and have gotten more wisdom than all they that

have been before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge” (v. 16).

 What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? *Wisdom is knowledge applied; it's ability to take one's knowledge and skillfully employ it in living.*

2. ***His practice of wisdom (v. 17a).***

Solomon uses the same phrase as in verse 13—“I gave my heart” (i.e., got serious, made it his focus, determined in his heart, applied his mind to it). His goal is to discover what benefits in actual living “knowledge and wisdom” offer over “madness and folly.” “Madness and folly” are simply synonymous terms that refer to behaviors and ideas that lack insight, prudence, and understanding (1:17; 2:3, 12f; 7:25; 10:1, 13).¹⁰ “The point is probably that, as the Preacher thought about wisdom and knowledge, he kept one eye on the alternatives.”¹¹


 How do these alternatives manifest themselves today in systems of philosophical thought or simply lifestyle practices? *See paragraph below.*

Today, these alternatives include Epicureanism (i.e., proposes that the greatest good is to seek modest pleasures through simple living and freedom from bodily pain), Hedonism (i.e., proposes that people should strive to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible to them), and adolescence or immaturity (i.e., simply living a self-centered life, devoid of responsibility and prudence; cf. 2:3b).

3. ***His problem with wisdom (vv. 17b-18).***

In the end, Solomon’s practice of wisdom (and anti-wisdom) only earned him “grief” (or frustration) and “sorrow” (or pain, suffering, heartache) (v. 18). See, “Those who take life seriously can never take it lightly (v. 18)”¹² and “the more you understand, the more you ache” (Moffatt).⁹ That is because the value of wisdom is

paradoxically in its ability to give “particular clarity as to just how ‘evil’ the ‘business’ of living can be....The point is that wisdom and knowledge dispel illusions.”¹³ Thus, the familiar epitaph: “I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit [lit. striving after wind]” (v. 17b).

 ***Application/Realization:*** Consider the following proverbial statements. Such pithy sayings are meant to be applied in life, and the indication is that such practice will alleviate some of its frustrations. How has such practical wisdom been a source of frustration to you? *open discussion*

- Opposites attract.
- Distance makes the heart grow fonder.
- Cheaters never prosper.
- You reap what you sow.
- The early bird gets the worm.
- Easy come, easy go.
- Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
- Be sure your sin will find you out.
- The way of the transgressor is hard.
- A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.
- It builds character.
- Waste not, want not.
- No pain, no gain; no guts, no glory.

While Solomon admits here that wisdom is not *the* answer, he will later recommend wisdom and “common sense” living as a mitigation in this frustrating world. When operating within “the fear of God,” living out His revealed will (i.e., the wisdom of His Word—cf. James 3:13-18) does alleviate and even help us avoid much heartache.

Transition: We have seen the limitations of wisdom in its conclusions and application. Finally, from 2:12-17, we recognize the limitations of wisdom in its destination.

THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM SEEN IN ITS DESTINATION (2:12-17)

Solomon reiterates in 2:12 what he stated in 1:17, and points out that while his experiment could be duplicated, it couldn't be exceeded. He has thoroughly tested this proposed answer to the problem of life, even tracking it all the way to its destination. Here's his final appraisal on wisdom.

1. *Wisdom may ease the difficulties of life (vv. 12-14a).*

Solomon reports, "Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head [i.e., he can see where he is going]; but the fool walketh in darkness" (Proverbs 4:18-19). That is the benefit of such proverbs as listed above. Like a lamp that provides direction and protection in darkness, the skillful understanding and use of knowledge allows us to navigate through life with fewer bruises and with a better grip on reality.

2. *Wisdom still experiences the death of life (vv. 14b-17).*

But, in the middle of verse 14, Solomon's tone changes abruptly: "[But] I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them [both]." This event is, of course, death, the great leveler—"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!" (v. 16). Even this great sage, Solomon, would experience the same destination as the most foolish (v. 15a). He had discovered that "death is the wall that under-the-sun secularism cannot climb. Even the remembrance of those who have died perishes with those who knew them personally. Beethoven may be said to live on in his music, but the truth is we know the music, not the man."¹⁴

So, Solomon can only finish his investigation by soberly wondering why he started the quest in the first place (i.e.,

"why was I then more wise?"—v. 15b).¹⁵ He understands that "not only can wisdom not offer mortal beings release from the 'evil business' of living...(1:12-18); it also cannot solve the problem of death."¹⁶

Thus, his haunting refrain is heard again at the end of this section—"Therefore I hated life, because the work that is wrought [or that which happens or is accomplished] under the sun is grievous unto me; for all is vanity and vexation of spirit [lit. striving after wind]" (v. 17)

Application/Realization: In the New Testament, we again find what our soul is craving. The problem of death, unsolved by wisdom "under the sun" is resolved by the Wisdom that is the Son (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30; 15:54-58). Furthermore, when we walk in that Wisdom, we will never be lost in darkness (John 1:9; 3:19; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Ephesians 5:8).



How can we acquire such Wisdom? open discussion...first: conversion to a relationship—John 1:4-12; Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:13; secondly: cultivating a relationship—Psalm 51:6; 111:10; Ephesians 1:17; Colossians 1:9; 2 Peter 1:5-9; James 1:5 → Be sure to emphasize that such wisdom is only found in Christ, who we relate to through Scripture (James 3:13-18)! Wisdom "from above" is needed and it comes through the Word!

CONCLUSION

"The scientist tells us that the world is a closed system and nothing is changed. The historian tells us that life is a closed book and nothing is new. The philosopher tells us that life is a deep problem and nothing is understood. But Jesus Christ is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24), and He has miraculously broken into history to bring new life to all who trust Him."¹⁷ Life is solved only by eternity, and this is the wisdom that Jesus offers. Live before Him in fear and enjoy the significance and meaning of His wisdom.

ENDNOTES

¹ *The MacArthur Study Bible*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr., electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), Ec 1:13.

² Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 74.

³ “This may sound more like bitterness than faith, but in fact it drops a clue to something positive which will be picked up in the final chapters. At worst it would imply that there was some sense, not the nonsense of chance, behind our situation, even if the sense it wholly daunting. But it can equally chime in with the purposeful discipline which God imposed upon us as the sequel to the Fall. That was how Paul—with an evident glance at Ecclesiastes—was to interpret the travail of the world: ‘for the creation was subjected to futility... by the will of him who subjected it in hope’” (Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976], 29).

⁴ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 69.

⁵ *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Ec 1:12-18.

⁶ Eaton, 75.

⁷ “If we try to discover the meaning of life and, in the process, leave God out of the equation, our conclusion will be distorted and illusionary. To do so means that we are left with a distorted conclusion that cannot be straightened until God is put back into the equation. As a consequence, our conclusion has no substance” (Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, Opening Up Commentary [Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005], 28).

⁸ “The Teacher has confronted us with a situation that today might be called “existential.” Man exists in a series of experiences and cannot discover any onward meaning in them. All he can do is exist and make the best of what comes—or drop out altogether. Yet most people still believe that life has some meaning if only they could find it. In his first mention of God (v. 13), the Teacher stated what comes out again later (e.g., 3:11)—viz., that God has given something to man that he has denied to the rest of the animal world: the constant, though often worrying, urge to make sense of life and to work toward a transcendent ideal. An animal lives within the circle of its instincts and drives. Man, in the likeness of God, looks for meanings so that he can control and direct his instinctive desires. Someone has said that it is better to be Socrates discontented (because he cannot solve his problems) than a contented pig. It may sound easy to abandon the search for ultimates and to drop to an animal level, but even the dropout often knows the restlessness and the pricks of conscience that belong to him as man. We are fallen beings who need the life and illumination that come from God” (J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes” In , in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991], 1154).

⁹ “His conclusion is that the attempt to solve the problem of life enlarges one’s view of the problem but does not bring any solution” (NBC, Ec 1:2–11.) “So long as wisdom is restricted to the realm ‘under the sun’, it sees the throbbing tumult of creation, life scurrying round its ever-repetitive circuits, and nothing more. ‘The more you understand, the more you ache’ (Moffatt)” (Eaton, 76).

¹⁰ Cf. NET Bible and DBL.

¹¹ Eaton, 75.

¹² Wright, 1155.

¹³ Provan, 71.

¹⁴ Gordon Keddie, *Looking for the Good Life*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1991, p. 21, quoted in Winter, 31.

¹⁵ The Hebrew contains a word-play between “more” (v. 15) and “excelleth” (v. 13)—“The wise man has a relative “advantage” (yitron) over the fool (2:13–14a); however, there is no ultimate advantage because both share the same fate, i.e., death (2:14b–15a). Thus, Qoheleth’s acquisition of tremendous wisdom (1:16; 2:9) was “excessive” [yoter] because it exceeded its relative advantage over folly: it could not deliver him from the same fate as the fool. He had striven to obtain wisdom, yet it held no ultimate advantage” (NET Bible, note 63 in v. 15).

¹⁶ Provan, 75.

¹⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 19.