

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

November 10, 2021

II. Human Effort (1:2-6:9)

A. All Is Vapor (1:2-11)

B. The King's Experiment (1:12-2:26)

Now that Solomon has introduced his major premise, that everything *under the sun* is *futility*, he's going to start giving specifics in three areas. These three areas are avenues through which he sought fulfillment in life, only to find them deeply unsatisfying. Note that our passage this morning is a chiasmic structure.

In 1:12-15, Solomon laments the futility of work, even calling it a *burdensome task God has given to the sons of man* (v. 13). There is no fulfillment in life if people are just out to accumulate accomplishments through their vocation. Indeed, much like we saw in 1:5-7, there is much activity, but very little gain to show for it.

In 1:16-18, he then examines the usefulness of wisdom, or lack thereof. Seven times in these three verses does he refer to *wisdom* and *knowledge*. Yet, it's also *grasping for the wind* (v. 17). Interestingly, he writes in v. 18 that wisdom and knowledge lead to *grief* and *sorrow*. The more we are aware of the world around us, the more we know the Truth, the more we tend to be aggrieved by the lack of it in the world around us.

The center of the chiasm, 2:1-11, focuses on pleasure. This incidentally continues to speak to Solomon's authorship of Ecclesiastes. He *built houses* (v. 4; cf. 2 Chron 8:1-6), *planted vineyards* (v. 4; cf. Song 8:11), and *made gardens and orchards* (v. 5; cf. Song 5:1). Solomon *acquired male and female servants* (v. 7; cf. 1 Kings 10:5; 2 Chron 8:7-8). Look at all that he did, yet it was *labor* and *toil* (vv. 10-11).

It's here in this paragraph that we catch a glimpse of the key to understanding Ecclesiastes. Is there anything wrong with work or wisdom? No! God actually commands it and calls us to seek after it!

But notice why Solomon pursued all three of these things: *for myself* (vv. 4-6, 8 [2x]). When the end goal of our existence is self-centered, we will never walk away fulfilled. Consider how miserable are those people who "have it all!" They've accumulated wealth and prestige, but to what end? They've gained nothing!

In 2:12-17, Solomon almost makes it sound like wisdom is to be despised, and that there's no advantage to it – *there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool* (v. 16). If no one is going to remember us, anyway, why try to do anything with our lives? Even if wisdom makes life a little easier now, *one fate comes to them both* (vv. 13-14).

Returning to work in 2:18-23, he continues his lament of what happens at death. We work and do all that we do, but then we *must leave it to the man who will come after us* (v. 18). This picks up on the idea of the legacy we leave behind in 1:11; once we die, the reality of our lack of control becomes painfully evident. It can lead to *despair* knowing all of our work may be for nothing (v. 20).

When we reach 2:24-26, we almost suffer from whiplash, as Solomon seems to do a 180°. How do we reconcile these verses with all that come before it? Are work, wisdom, and pleasure a miserable lot or not? Well, it all depends on why we seek those things. They aren't inherently evil, despite how starkly Solomon writes of them. Instead, we should enjoy them as *from the hand of God* (v. 24). Who can *enjoy life apart from Him* (v. 25, CSB)?

When we pursue the things of this world for our own personal benefit or gain, we will ultimately be left unsatisfied and despairing. When we refuse to let go of earthly things, we will be most miserable. We must view all of life as a stewardship and privilege to make the Lord's name great instead of our own, then and only then will we be truly content (v. 26). Yet, at the same time, it's *grasping at the wind*, because (a) *who is good in His sight?* (v. 26; cf. v. 21) and (b) Solomon laments elsewhere that God's favor is seemingly haphazard (cf. 9:1-3).