

What's the Use?

The wise person seeks to find meaning in life from God.

I am certain that most people have had to search for something they wanted or needed. One afternoon my wife called out to me to say that she couldn't find her glasses. She asked if I could please help her look for them. I immediately agreed and started searching. She was looking in the master bedroom, so I began my search in the living room. I searched without success in every conceivable spot where she might have laid down her glasses. Eventually, we met in the kitchen. I took one look at her and burst into laughter. Her glasses were resting on top of her head!

One morning a few months after that incident, my wife and I were scrambling to leave the house for an important appointment. It seemed that everything was conspiring to make us late. My wife started out the door to the car but paused long enough to shout instructions to me not to forget my glasses. I immediately slapped my shirt pocket, but the glasses were not there. Frantically, I searched all the places where I commonly put my glasses when I am not wearing them. Finally, I called for my wife to come and help in the search. And I am sure that you, the reader, may have already guessed where we found my glasses. That's right; I had them on all the time!

On a more serious note, sometimes people go their entire lives in search of—but never finding—the true meaning and purpose of life. Some people allow diversions to distract them from their search. Some people don't find their goal because they disparage its real value. The truly wise person will find his or her purpose in a right relationship with God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-2:26

Like the Books of Job and Proverbs, the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes is an example of Israelite wisdom literature. Whereas the Book of Proverbs focuses on dealing with the practical issues of life, Job and Ecclesiastes deal

with broad philosophical issues such as the purpose of life. The Book of Ecclesiastes investigates how to find meaning in life when, on the surface, life itself can sometimes feel meaningless.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is not directly named in the text. However, three descriptors in the book's opening verse offer solid clues as to who authored the work. First, the writer identified himself as "the Teacher" or, as some English Bible translations render the term, "the Preacher" (see KJV; ESV). The Hebrew word (using English letters) is *Koheleth* [koh HEL eth], which stems from a root word that means "assembly, convocation, or congregation." Thus, *koheleth* refers to one who leads and instructs a large gathering of people.

Second, the writer described himself as "son of David." In Israelite language and culture, the phrase "son of" could refer either to one of King David's actual sons or to a male born much later in David's lineage. (See, for example, Matt. 1:1, in which Jesus Christ is identified as "the Son of David.")

Third, the writer of Ecclesiastes described himself as "king in Jerusalem." This descriptor is further clarified in 1:12, where the writer added that he has "been king over Israel in Jerusalem." The only son of King David who ruled over the united kingdom of Israel was Solomon. Immediately after Solomon's death, the kingdom split into two nations, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (see 1 Kings 12:20). These three self-revealed clues of authorship are further supported by biblical evidence that King Solomon was known worldwide as a man of great wisdom as well as a writer and teacher of wisdom materials (see 1 Kings 4:29-34).

After identifying himself, Solomon identified in Ecclesiastes 1:3 the question that lay at the heart of the entire Book of Ecclesiastes: "What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?" In other words, does a person's earthly life have any true and lasting meaning? Solomon would have been familiar with two competing worldviews that offered responses to this question. One view was a purely naturalistic idea that human life had no real purpose. This view is echoed again and again in Ecclesiastes in the words "Everything is futile" (1:2; see also 1:14; 2:1,11,17,19; 4:4,16; 6:9; 8:10; 11:8; 12:8).

The second view might be called a biblical, or God-centered, worldview. Solomon knew the Lord, the one true God and Israel's covenant God (see 1 Kings 3:4-14). In this regard, Solomon's faith would have affirmed that God created human beings in His image, blessed them with vast provisions for food and shelter, gave them meaningful work to do, and enabled them to multiply and fill the earth with families and descendants. Solomon's personal investigations of life's aspects "under the sun"—human knowledge, constant pleasure, hard work, and vast wealth—confronted the question head-on as to what is the true and lasting purpose of human life.

In Ecclesiastes 1:12-18, Solomon observed that purely intellectual pursuits cannot answer the question of life's ultimate meaning. Since human knowledge is incomplete, wisdom brings potentially more distress.

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon explored a number of activities through which people seek fulfillment, concluding that each was futile. Wisdom provides certain merit but is temporary at best (2:12-17). Working only to acquire wealth wastes one's life, because in the end it goes to someone else (2:18-26).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

LIMITED PERSPECTIVE (Eccl. 1:12-15)

Solomon applied his mind to understand life's purpose through human wisdom. He found that effort to be futile, like pursuing the wind.

VERSE 12

I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

In the Hebrew text, the pronoun **I** is emphatic. It emphasizes that what follows is a personal report of the writer's own experiences and investigations. Underscoring his self-identification in 1:1, Solomon here referred to himself again as **the Teacher** (Hebrew, *kohleth*), meaning "leader and instructor of a congregation," and **king over Israel in Jerusalem**.

The verb rendered **have been** ("was," KJV; NIV) does not mean that Solomon was no longer the king in Israel. More likely, it indicates that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes late in his reign. He was Israel's ruler for nearly forty years—from 970 to 931 BC—and was drawing on that experience to inform his investigations into life's meaning.

Historically, Israel enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity at the time Ecclesiastes was written. Wisdom teachers gathered groups of young men to whom they sought to pass on their knowledge and experience. That Ecclesiastes was included in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) underscores its divine inspiration and continuing value for all of God's people in every generation.

VERSE 13

I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied.

The Hebrew phrase rendered **applied my mind** literally is “gave my heart” (see KJV). The ancient Israelites described life as they observed it, and their language reflected their observations. This observation was especially true in the use of language referring to parts of the human body. Because the heart was understood as the central organ of life (see Prov. 4:23), to give one’s heart to something was to focus all of one’s thinking and activity on it.

The ancient Israelite noted that whenever a person had to make a life-changing decision, the heart was affected. One’s heart rate increased noticeably, and sometimes added pressure built up in one’s chest. Hence, the heart came to be recognized as the center of human volition, the seat of thoughtful, deliberate decision making. Thus, Solomon declared that he had made a conscious, intentional decision to **examine** (“seek,” KJV; ESV; “study,” NIV) **and explore** (“search out,” KJV; ESV) **through wisdom all that is done under heaven**. He had focused all of his best thinking, resources, and activity on this singular quest to truly understand life’s meaning.

The phrase rendered *all that is done under heaven* is another example of ancient Israel’s picturesque use of observable reality in their language. We know today that the earth is a mostly round planet floating in space as it moves in orbit around the sun. Ancient Israelites viewed the earth as a generally flat surface on which they lived and moved. The sky above (*heaven*) appeared in the shape of a dome (from horizon to horizon) far above the earth and across which the sun and moon moved in regular, arc-like, daily intervals. Thus, the phrase *under heaven* referred to the earth’s total spectrum of ideas and activities.

The means by which Solomon would investigate the spectrum of life was *through wisdom*. To ancient Israel in general and to Solomon in particular, true wisdom was a gift from God (see 1 Kings 3:7-12). Furthermore, wisdom existed on three distinct levels. On a first level, wisdom often was equated with skill and craftsmanship. A good example of this level of wisdom can be seen in the appointment of Bezalel to oversee construction of the tabernacle when the Israelites were at Mount Sinai. Moses told the people that the Lord had “filled [Bezalel] with God’s Spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and ability in every kind of craft to design artistic works in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut gemstones for mounting, and to carve wood for work in every kind of artistic craft” (Ex. 35:31-33).

On a second level, wisdom involved what we might call life skills or social skills. For example, the Book of Proverbs is filled with practical counsel (formulated in short, pithy, memorable sayings) designed to help people live in harmony with one another and with God. The third and highest form of wisdom involved grappling with complex overarching issues such as the meaning of suffering (Job) or the purpose of life itself (Ecclesiastes).

In the second half of Ecclesiastes 1:13, Solomon seemed to be describing the essential nature of human life in the most pessimistic terms. Life appeared to be little more than a **miserable task** (“sore travail,” KJV; “unhappy business,” ESV; “heavy burden,” NIV) that **God** had **given people ... to keep them occupied**.

What today’s interpreters of the Book of Ecclesiastes must keep in mind is that Solomon was describing life from a purely human perspective—that is, life *under heaven*, not life from God’s perspective in heaven. Human wisdom alone is earthbound; it cannot comprehend life’s ultimate meaning. It yields only a pessimistic, naturalistic worldview. Solomon’s sobering observations in Ecclesiastes serve to expose the emptiness and hopelessness of a strictly atheistic worldview.

VERSE 14

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

Solomon then reported that he had **seen all the things that are done under the sun**. From his position as a wise, wealthy king who was known and respected worldwide, Solomon likely was making no empty boast when he claimed to have “seen it all.” More importantly, though, he was emphasizing the comprehensive and thorough nature of his investigations. Subsequent passages in the Book of Ecclesiastes recount specific areas of exploration and authenticate his general claim here. The phrase *under the sun* was a parallel way of saying “under heaven” (see 1:13 and the comments on the phrase). Indeed, Solomon apparently preferred the phrase *under the sun*, using it nearly thirty times in the book while using the phrase “under heaven” only three times.

Darkness often conceals criminal activity, but bright sunlight illuminates everything. Nothing is hidden. Consequently, deeds performed in the light of the sun were deemed to have been done deliberately. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon took the figure of speech a step further. Doing something *under the sun* may have implied acting deliberately on one’s own volition, without seeking God’s guidance. Hence, the phrase *all the things that are done under the sun* may well describe human actions taken apart from God. Solomon labeled such activity as **futile** (“vanity,” KJV; ESV; “meaningless,” NIV), as absurd as **a pursuit of the wind** (“vexation of spirit,” KJV).

VERSE 15

What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

In this verse, Solomon summarized his use of intellectual capabilities with a proverb. The structure of the proverb employs synonymous parallelism, a poetic feature in which the second line repeats the meaning of the first line using synonymous vocabulary. The words **what is crooked cannot be straightened** signify a problem that cannot be solved. God's inscrutable ways can never be fully comprehended by mere human wisdom. Similarly, the words **what is lacking cannot be counted** describe an inability to solve a problem because key information is missing. Without all of the relevant data, the resulting answer to a problem will be incorrect. The essence of this proverb, then, is that any effort to find meaning in life is inherently flawed if it does not rely on God-given wisdom. While human wisdom has some value—it is better than living foolishly—it has a limited perspective. We need God's gift of wisdom to find and fulfill life's true purpose.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Solomon" on pages 1486–1487 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does it say to you that a person such as King Solomon—who had all the possessions, power, and fame that anyone could want—saw the emptiness of trusting in these things for a sense of ultimate meaning?

INHERITANCE BLOWN? (Eccl. 2:18-21)

Solomon despaired to think that a person might work hard and with great skill only to die and have nothing of lasting gain. The result would be futile.

VERSE 18

I hated all my work that I labored at under the sun because I must leave it to the one who comes after me.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, Solomon discussed the ultimate emptiness of defining life's meaning in terms of constant pleasure and great possessions. In that passage, he emphasized that neither of these aspects of life could provide true and lasting meaning.

In 2:18, Solomon returned to the aspect of acquiring material possessions but with an added twist to the subject. Here he focused on the strenuous efforts usually required to gain wealth or possessions. Solomon confessed that he **hated all** of the **work that he labored at under the sun**. This expression does not mean that Solomon was a slacker. He did not despise the

idea of work or even that some types of work could be mentally and physically exhausting. Instead, what Solomon *hated* was the reality that a person might work hard for a lifetime and by doing so acquire a commendable nest egg of wealth and possessions—only to **leave it all to the one who comes after** him or her. He was not railing against the idea of leaving an inheritance for one’s family. Rather, he was describing the futility of seeking true and lasting meaning in life by being a workaholic focused only on acquiring more stuff. People cannot take their wealth and possessions with them when they die; they (and we) must leave it all behind.

In this context, the Hebrew word translated *work* likely refers to the dark aspects of labor, that which brings pain and toil but not fulfillment. The phrase *under the sun* emphasizes the magnitude of Solomon’s efforts. His labor was international in scope. The Hebrew verb rendered *hated* includes not only an emotional aspect but also the choice to reject something. Solomon adamantly rejected the idea of working constantly to acquire possessions as the ultimate measure of life’s meaning.

VERSE 19

And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will take over all my work that I labored at skillfully under the sun. This too is futile.

In this verse, Solomon continued to explain the reason he rejected the idea that working ceaselessly to acquire possessions was life’s ultimate purpose. Even if a person successfully amasses a fortune through hard work and leaves it to his or her heirs—which must and will occur at the person’s death—**who knows whether** the heir **will be wise or a fool?** Human history is filled with examples of prodigal sons and daughters who reaped large inheritances at a parent’s death only to fritter away the businesses and wealth through laziness or foolish lifestyles. In Scripture, *wise* individuals prove to be skillful, prudent in decision making, and committed to the Lord and His ways. Fools, on the other hand, lack spiritual commitment and moral sense. They live selfishly, wastefully, and with a lack of integrity.

Solomon’s own family history proved the point of this verse. Solomon built up vast wealth during his reign through numerous types of businesses (see 1 Kings 4:20-28; 10:14-29). When he died, his son Rehoboam [REE huh BOH uhm] became the new king (1 Kings 11:43). Right out of the gate, Rehoboam had a crucial decision to make. He had to decide whether to act like a servant leader toward the people of Israel or like a tyrant. He foolishly chose the tyrant approach. Consequently, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel revolted, and Rehoboam lost the greater part of his father’s kingdom (see 1 Kings 12).

VERSE 20

So I began to give myself over to despair concerning all my work that I had labored at under the sun.

Here again, the phrase **under the sun** has the sense of one's life on earth. Additionally, the terminology of **all my work** and **I had labored** emphasizes day-to-day toil that is painful, unfulfilling, and wearisome. Solomon had investigated the essential nature of work and found that while fortunes could be amassed through hard work, those fortunes could just as quickly evaporate in the next generation after a person's death. If life's ultimate meaning lay in working hard to become wealthy, that meaning was at best a mirage. Therefore, in regard to this investigation, Solomon **began to give himself over to despair**.

VERSE 21

When there is a person whose work was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and he must give his portion to a person who has not worked for it, this too is futile and a great wrong.

In this verse, Solomon emphasized again the factor that most depressed him about connecting life's ultimate meaning to work and wealth. **A person whose work was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill** throughout the individual's lifetime **must** at death **give his portion** ("everything," ESV; "all they own," NIV) **to a person who has not worked for it**. What Solomon added in this verse was the realization that inheriting a fortune from one's parents proves (in some instances at least) that hard work is not the be-all, end-all key to gaining great wealth. Therefore, work and wealth cannot be said to be life's ultimate purpose. And from Solomon's perspective, such an idea was **futile and a great wrong** ("vanity and a great evil," KJV; ESV; "meaningless and a great misfortune," NIV). It was futile because in death not only did the wise person's possessions go to someone else but also the skill and intelligence that acquired the wealth ceased to exist. It was a great wrong because a foolish person could acquire wealth not worked for.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Wealth and Materialism" on pages 1641–1642 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some dangers of gaining great wealth in this life? How can a person develop a godly perspective about wealth?

ENJOY WORK (Eccl. 2:22-26)

Solomon realized that God gave humans life and work as a means of joy, not despair. Despair arises when humans seek to enjoy life apart from God.

VERSE 22

For what does a person get with all his work and all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?

With this verse, Solomon shifted his discussion about work and accumulated wealth back to the time-frame of before one's death. If the value of one's hard work and accumulation of wealth evaporated at one's death, then exactly **what does a person get with all his work and all his efforts** during his lifetime (**under the sun**)? The Hebrew word rendered *work* ("toil," ESV; NIV) is the same noun Solomon used in previous verses to emphasize the toilsome, often frustrating, aspects of labor. The term translated *efforts* ("vexation of his heart," KJV; "striving of heart," ESV; "anxious striving," NIV) literally reads "longing of his heart."

VERSE 23

For all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful; even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile.

Solomon's answer to the question posed in the previous verse is depressing yet realistic. What people sometimes get from their hard, frustrating work lives are **days ... filled with grief**. The word rendered *grief* can refer either to physical pain or mental anguish. Here the phrase probably refers to working in a constant state of stress. Solomon depicted a worker whose **occupation** ("work," ESV; NIV) brought only sorrow and sleepless nights. For this reason, he concluded that work as a measure of ultimate meaning was **futile**.

VERSE 24

There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him?

If work—even successful, well-paying work—is not the measure of life's ultimate meaning, then what should our attitude be toward work? To put the question another way, "Is work worth the effort we put into it?" This is the point at which Solomon's faith gave him new insight into this matter.

Solomon concluded that **there is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work**. Just because work is not the ultimate

purpose of life doesn't mean it isn't valuable and important. In fact, Solomon realized that work was a gift to human beings **from God's hand**. Work was a divine design feature of human life from the beginning. Even before humanity's fall into sin, "the LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it" (Gen. 2:15).

Solomon further realized that a right relationship with God, a relationship of trust and obedience, was the real key to life. It was (and is) God the Creator who provided humanity with food **to eat**. It was (and is) a right relationship with God that enabled God's people, including Solomon, to **enjoy life**.

As believers, we can choose to view work in the biblical perspective, the way God designed it. When we do, we understand that work is a gift from God by which we can provide the necessities of life for ourselves and our families as well as find ways to be generous toward those in need (see Eph. 4:28; Col. 3:23-24).

VERSE 26

For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

God's sovereignty and grace are at the heart of this verse. In His grace, God gives **the person who is pleasing in his sight ... wisdom, knowledge, and joy**. On the other hand, God gives **to the sinner ... the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight**. The difference, then, between a life of joy and fulfillment and a life of futility lies in a right relationship with God. To *the sinner*, the one who rejects God's ways and works only to selfishly stockpile wealth and possessions, work will prove in the end to be **futile and a pursuit of the wind**.

In reality, all people are sinners (see Rom. 3:23). Therefore, Solomon's final observation provides evidence of divine grace. The person who is pleasing in God's sight is the one who has responded to the gospel by faith in Christ Jesus. Believers can enjoy their work, thanking God for His provisions.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Ecclesiastes 2:26. What are some ways you have seen God's sovereignty at work in your life? How can believers find wisdom and joy in the work they do to make a living?