

# Ecclesiastes 2:12-26

The squirrel-cage of earthly wisdom and hard work



# Comparison between wisdom and folly (2:12-17)

*<sup>12</sup> So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.*

- Can wisdom be passed down to the next generation?
- Passing on things learned in life seems like a possible goal
- History repeats itself because people don't learn from previous generations

*<sup>13</sup> Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.*

- Solomon learned that using one's head is better than living by one's nerve-endings
- The difference is like using a flashlight or walking in the darkness - "*eyes in his head*"
- Even though using your head through life is superior to being guided by thrills and excitement, death for all is an unavoidable reality

# Comparison between wisdom and folly (2:12-17)

*<sup>15</sup> Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. <sup>16</sup> For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!*

- The inevitability of death for all causes him to question if using his head is all that valuable
- Ignorance may not be bliss, but is the work of learning, preparing and planning ultimately worthwhile?
  - Death is a great equalizer
  - In the end, is it wise to be wise?

*<sup>17</sup> So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

- Evaluating the benefits of earthly wisdom and human folly causes him to despise life
- It is maddening when the ends are the same regardless of means
  - Psalm 14:1-3
  - The foolish don't figure it out
  - The worldly wise don't figure it out
  - No one “feels” or “reasons” their way to God

# Exasperation resulting from earthly wisdom and hard work (2:18-23)

*<sup>18</sup> I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, <sup>19</sup> and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.*

- Solomon reasoned and worked hard to achieve earthly success
- In the end, he will pass on all he worked for to his son - Rehoboam
  - Work is inescapable
    - Genesis 3:17-19
- Wisdom desires to leave to others the fruit of diligence and hard work
  - It may be used and further developed
  - It may be squandered by laziness, greed or foolishness
- Solomon is saying that passing on to others what we worked hard for is a shot in the dark

*<sup>20</sup> So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, <sup>21</sup> because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.*

- Further contemplation of how his hard work will be enjoyed by someone who doesn't have to earn it is a source of consternation
- When hard work is not appreciated, the fruit of it is easily squandered
- Our world is filled with fools and it is vanity and great evil

# Exasperation resulting from earthly wisdom and hard work (2:18-23)

*<sup>22</sup> What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

- Hard work can be productive, but it is not easy
- The struggles exceed what can be achieved by sweat alone
  - Work can keep people from resting at night (worrying about things they cannot change)
  - People work hard to store up for retirement believing they will live long enough to enjoy it
    - Luke 12:15-21
- How can one escape the vanity?
  - Matthew 6:19-21
- Live to honor the Lord Jesus by promoting gospel grace, spreading truth and justice in His world for the sake of His kingdom

# Enjoying a toilsome life is a gift from God (2:24-26)

<sup>24</sup> *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,* <sup>25</sup> *for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

- The futility of godless pursuits for the meaning of life is by the hand of God on His earth
  - Ecclesiastes 1:13
- Solomon used his wisdom, influence, power and prestige for all manner of self-gratification and self-aggrandizement
- Trying to find purpose and meaning out of life on God's earth is an "*unhappy business*" (a distressing task)
- Attempting to mentally grasp the point or significance of multitudes of earthly and fleshly activities brings no satisfying conclusions apart from God
- What is the difference in this second mention of God by Solomon in his instruction to the assembly of God's people?
  - Life lived without humble dependence on God makes no sense and is exasperating
  - Apart from God there is no meaningful satisfaction and joy
    - 1 Timothy 6:17
    - Let us enjoy all we have as a gift of God's grace and kindness to us, as we share it with others
    - This should be our heart this Thanksgiving Day
- Apart from God, true thanksgiving and joy are not possible

# Enjoying a toilsome life is a gift from God (2:24-26)

*<sup>26</sup> For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

- This verse boldly declares the total sovereignty of God over the blessings given to the godly and the curses given to the sinners
- To live life pleasing to God is the result of God's gracious gifts of wisdom, knowledge and joy
- To engage in the vaporous business of gathering and collecting, only to give it ultimately to others, is God's design

*“This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”*

- The reality of God's sovereign control frustrates and disappoints because men and women have no control over these things
  - Romans 9:18-23

# Questions to Consider

- Have you seen the wisdom of using your head in life as opposed to living by your nerve-endings?
- When you consider that both the wise and the frivolous die, what difference does it make how you live?
- What is the point of hard work on earth?
- What does Jesus mean by saying, “...*one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*”?
- On this Thanksgiving Day, how can you express gratitude for the wisdom, knowledge and joy, that are gifts from God enabling you to live a life pleasing to God?

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