

The Futility of Wealth and Labor Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 2

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 - *“I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter — “Madness!” and of mirth, “What does it accomplish?” ³ I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. ⁴ I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. ⁵ I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. ⁷ I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.*

⁹ *So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. ¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.”*

Background Notes

In Ecclesiastes 1:1, the author of this book called himself the “teacher” or “preacher” – in Hebrew, *qoheleth*. This “teacher” was most likely King Solomon, the son of David and king of Jerusalem (1:1 & 1:12), wiser than all the kings before him (1:16). Who could this be, other than King Solomon? And who besides King Solomon had the means and experience to declare with authority at the end of his life that “under the sun” (that is, from the human perspective) all was “vanity” - futile and meaningless.

The phrase “under the sun” is used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and this phrase is the key to understanding this book of Scripture. When he used this phrase, Solomon, the inspired author, was **not** describing the way things really are - from God’s perspective. Solomon was looking at life from the human perspective – “under the sun” – the way life would look if we did not have divine revelation.

Chapter 1 concluded that from the “under the sun” perspective, the cycles of life lead to futility, and human wisdom and knowledge lead to futility. Chapter 2 continues this theme: when life is viewed from the “under the sun” perspective, the pursuits of pleasure, wealth and every form of materialism all lead to futility.

Doctrinal Points

1. “Under the sun,” pleasure and wealth lead to futility.

Solomon decided to investigate - to conduct a “scientific experiment” - to see if he could derive any real meaning in life through pleasure and wealth (v1-11). But he didn’t experiment with a casual hedonistic lifestyle. No. He carefully planned an investigation of hedonism, using all of his wisdom to set up his experiment, and eliminating any variables. *“I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives” (v3).*

When all was said and done, Solomon found that he found no lasting satisfaction from anything he did to stimulate his body and to gratify its desires. The use of myrrh and wine may have extended the moments of pleasure, but in the end, all was meaningless.

What about wealth? Wouldn’t plenty of money make life worth living? Most of us can’t try this experiment because we don’t have money - but Solomon’s bank account was unlimited. So, Solomon built mansions, planted large vineyards, made beautiful gardens, and parks with ponds (v4-6). He had servants to bring him whatever he desired. He owned large flocks and herds (a sign of wealth), and he amassed silver and gold (v7-8).

In addition, Solomon used his wealth to acquire the best musical entertainment and even a harem, so he could indulge in sex with many concubines (v8). Solomon probably tried “wine, women, and song” more than any other man who ever lived.

But the wisest man who ever lived, who had unlimited wealth and pleasure, concluded his investigation with our doctrinal point: “Under the sun,” pleasure and wealth lead to futility. Verse 11: *Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done, and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.*

Next Solomon used his wisdom to further analyze his failing experiments to find meaning in life. He concluded that in the short run wisdom is better than folly, because wise people at least had more light on the subject, and tended to make better decisions than the fool who walks in darkness. *“Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who succeeds the king? — Only what he has already done. ¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. ¹⁴ The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (v12-14).*

So in the long run, what difference did it all really make? “Under the sun,” the fool dies - and so does the wise person. Their fate is the same. Verses 14-15: *“Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all. ¹⁵ So I said in my*

heart, “As it happens to the fool, it also happens to me, and why was I then more wise?” Then I said in my heart, “This also is vanity.”

After death, the wise person may be remembered a little longer and a little better than the fool, but in the end they’re both forgotten. So what difference does it make whether a person is wise or a fool? Life is meaningless. “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!” (v16).

Viewed from the “under the sun” perspective, pleasure and wealth lead to futility.

2. “Under the sun,” life and labor lead to futility.

Verses 17-23: “Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind. ¹⁸ Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.

²⁰ Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. ²¹ For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? ²³ For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.”

We might have concluded that the first part of the chapter doesn’t apply to us, because we’re not in the category of wealthy pleasure seekers - we’re just trying to make ends meet and survive! But verses 17-23 cover the whole area of life and labor, and that certainly includes all of us. Let’s face it: apart from divine revelation, and without the divine viewpoint, we’ve got to conclude that life and labor is futile. It’s like “striving after wind” (v17).

In fact, if you’re logical, you will hate life, because there’s no guarantee that your hard work and all your hard-earned cash won’t be squandered, or even used for evil purposes, by some fool or sluggard down the line (v18-21). We all know heartbreaking stories of inheritances that are squandered or misspent – stories that prove Solomon’s conclusion. Not only that, but all our hard work does not necessarily bring better health, or longer life, or peace of mind (v22-23)!

Viewed from the “under the sun” perspective, life and labor lead to futility.

Practical Application

Let's "look down" on life and labor.

What do we mean by: Let's look down on life and labor? Well, we don't mean that we should despise life and labor. What we mean is that we need to get the divine perspective on life and labor – the perspective from "above the sun"! Verse 24: *"Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God."*

When God is brought into the picture, and human life and labor are viewed from the divine perspective (that is found in the rest of Scripture), then we can enjoy life, and we can find purpose in our work. 1 Timothy 6:17-18 says *"Command those who are rich in this present age not to... trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸ Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share."* God richly supplies us with everything for our enjoyment! And even if we're not wealthy, we can be "rich in good works." We can be generous, and we should be ready to share what we have with others.

I love the last verse of Ecclesiastes 2: *"For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind."*

God has ways of channeling the hard work and labor of the unbeliever, who is "striving after wind," into the benefit of the believer who is putting the Lord first. I've seen this literally happen more than once. This is all part of the divine perspective on life and labor that we can and should have. So let's "look down" on life and labor from the "above the sun" perspective!