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THE QUESTIONS AND THE QUEST:
THE QUESTION OF WISDOM AND FOLLY
ECCLESIASTES 2:12-18

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2:12-17 – THE QUESTION OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

Introduction to the Text

We instinctively want wisdom. Whether it goes by the contemporary label of education, knowledge, or competence – we all instinctively know it is something desirable, respected, and beneficial. We also instinctively know wisdom is better than foolishness. I'd assume that you'd prefer your next-door neighbor to be a sage than a reprobate. And so, I'd be right. Nobody in their right mind sets out to be a fool in life, but there are those who in their pursuit of wisdom end up pursuing folly. So, where is the line point where wisdom is no longer wise? Where is there a point where wisdom "shoots itself in the foot?" Where is the line between wisdom and foolishness?

Review. In the previous pericope (1:18-2:11), Solomon tested himself with "joy" and invited himself to "see good" – just like God did in creation. So, Solomon endeavored upon "great works" (2:4). Essentially, he inquired if the meaning of life was to find joy in accomplishing great works, and he mirrored the works of God in creation. In the end, however, he found that it was not sustainable as that all of it would eventually perish, all of it is subject to entropy and would be *hevel*.

Preview. In the current pericope (2:12-18), the assumption is that goal of wisdom is the preservation and flourishing of human life. The question here is, in essence, "If wisdom fails at accomplishing this goal, then what's the point of wisdom?" Let's just be honest; death is not preservation or flourishing. Death is death, to be frank. So, it seems wisdom cannot accomplish the very goal for which it seeks to serve.

Some forms of wisdom never reach their goals or potential. In fact, some forms of wisdom cause harm to the very thing they seek to help because they are not grounded in a fear of the Lord (Prov 9:10). In this text, Solomon inquires to the limits of

wisdom and the line between wisdom and foolishness. The acute and most important limitation Solomon observes is wisdom's inability to deliver from death. To put it another way, knowledge cannot save us.

Theological focus. The fallen condition focus highlights the problem of death. On his own, man has a problem, or fear, that is impossible to solve (Heb 2:15). While Solomon points us to God (Ecc 12:13-14), later the God-man demonstrates his power over death by physically raising Lazarus from the grave (Jn 11:38-44). He later conquers death through his own resurrection.¹

Structure. The structure of this section of the text spans from 2:12-26. The two book ends are observations about good and evil, with the next brackets lamenting that those who have not labored will get what a man has worked for all his life, and the center of the chiastic structure is a pondering over whether the person who receives the inheritance will be wise or foolish.

Structure of Ecclesiastes 2:12-26	
A	Good and evil: wisdom over folly (2:12-16)
B	To those who have not labored (2:18)
C	Wise or fool: Who knows ... a wise man or a fool (2:19)
B'	To those who have not labored (2:20-21)
A'	Good and evil: sinner gathers, gives to the one who pleases God (2:22-26)

In Solomon's case, the inheritance and all that he worked to establish in 1 Kings 4-8 are going to be left to his son, Rehoboam. There is no "direct reference to Rehoboam (1 Kgs 11:41-12:24), but he aptly illustrates the point."²

Purpose. Solomon gives the purpose of the text later in Ecc 2:24 when he

¹ Matt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-27; John 20-21

² Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 18, ed. D. J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP Academic, 2008), 84.

says, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” So, the theme of this pericope teaches us that since all human endeavors under the sun are *hevel*, man is to find his enjoyment in his food, his work, and all the gifts that are given from God’s hand.” Why would Solomon seek to impart this wisdom to Israel, to the *qahal*? In the time of Solomon’s reign, Israel was at its most peaceful and prosperous years. It was described as unprecedented peace and prosperity.

And [Solomon] had peace on all sides around him. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon (1 Kings 4:24-25).

It seems this unprecedented flourishing could capture the hearts of his fellow Israelites, who then would be in danger of valuing material prosperity and circumstances about God. In other words, they are in danger of loving the gift more than the Giver.

Exposition of the Text

2:12. Solomon then turns to wisdom, madness and folly. Solomon is using a *henidays* here, which is two words joined by the word “and” to express a single idea. When Jeremiah is lamenting the conquering of Israel, he writes that the gates of city have been “ruined and broken” (Lam 2:9). Jeremiah is not writing of two different concepts, but of a totality of a single concept. Solomon is doing the same here with madness and folly. You could say “mad folly” because they are a single concept.³ So, Solomon is contrasting the two concepts of wisdom and “mad folly.”

The next half of the verse is difficult to interpret. The literal rendering of this verse would read, “And I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly, for what

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Crossway Books, 2010), 59.

kind of person is it who will come after the king, in the matter of what has already been done?" It could be that Solomon is asking what more could anyone else who comes after him know about the meaning of life. Essentially Solomon is pondering that if he can't figure out the meaning of life, when who after him will? I think this is what Solomon is asking, because immediately after this, there comes a ray of hope.

2:13-14a. Until this point, there has been an assessment of everything as *hevel*. It is all going to pass, and it holds no eternal value. However, now there is a ray of hope coming through the clouds, or "there is some progression to his thought."⁴ There is *some* gain after all. Therefore, when Solomon compares wisdom to folly, he sees that there is "more gain" in wisdom than foolishness; there is more gain in light than darkness.

"We know this when the lights are out. Even if we think we know where everything is, we often end up tripping over things that turn out to be in our way. In the same way, foolish people go stumbling through life."⁵

Then Solomon writes that the wise person "has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness." The Bible often uses light and darkness as a metaphor for good and evil. Walking in darkness is akin to walking in sin.⁶ So, Solomon is essentially saying the difference between walking in wisdom and walking in foolishness is the difference between walking in light and darkness. Biblically, wisdom is not only light, but sight.

2:14b. Solomon does not seem to be happy with simple answers. Yes, wisdom is better than folly, but as his presses the profit of wisdom and folly in the end, he sees both are subject to the same end: death (cf. Ps 49:10). English translations use the

⁴ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

⁵ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

⁶ When used of idols: Ps 82:5. When used of good versus evil: Prov 2:12-15; 4:19; Isa 5:20; Job 24:16-17. When used of people: Matt 5:14; Jn 3:19-20; 12:35; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 4:18.

phrase “the same event,” or “one event,” or “the same fate” to describe death. In that case, fate is not referring to all events in a person’s life, but simply that all will die.

Here is an extremely important aspect to know if we are going to understand Ecclesiastes. The entire reason that Solomon sets out on his quest is because he is going to die. Solomon is too wise to believe otherwise. Humans are not immortal; we are finite. If Solomon believed that he was immortal, then there would be no quest for the purpose of life. The existence of his quest co-exists with the reality that “life under the sun” will invariably come to an end for all of us, no matter how great our wisdom is.

We know it, but we don’t.

We know it, but don’t *believe* it.

Somehow, we think are going to find a way not to die. We don’t think we’re going to get that terminal cancer diagnosis. We don’t think we’re going to get in that tragic car accident. Humanity will find a cure for cancer. Somehow the doctor is going to save me when I arrive at the hospital. We tend to live our lives acknowledging that we are going to die, but surprised when death arrives to our door. So, Solomon’s question is, “What does wisdom profit if, no matter how much wisdom (or advances in medical technology) we gain, both the wise and fool die?”

2:15. Solomon asks this question via introspection, “Why then have I been so very wise?” That’s a good question. We seem to instinctively know that wisdom is better than foolishness, but when considered in view of death, Solomon cannot tell us why wisdom is better.⁷ If a function of wisdom is to provide answers, and Solomon cannot find the answer to the meaning of life that he is so desperately searching for, then why did he seek to become wise in the first place? Why is wisdom better?

Dr. Paul Kalanithi was a neurosurgeon who had helped many people through

⁷ Douglas Wilson, *Joy at The End of The Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Canon Press, 2007), 34.

many diseases to live a healthier and longer life. However, all his knowledge of medicine and years of practice could not stop the day when he, the doctor, was diagnosed with lung cancer. It forced him to the patient rather than the doctor. He wrote a book about his reflections on life called *When Breath Becomes Air*.⁸ The very *hevel* that we breathe will one day be our last, and our last breath will become *hevel* – nothing, fleeting, and gone. So, the question that logically follows is that if Dr. Kalanithi cannot cure his own lung cancer, why then did he become a doctor? To simply help others when he can't help himself. Solomon asks the same question, "Why then did I seek to be so wise?" The rhetorical response would be something like "To wisely answer questions for others (1 Kings 3:16-28), but not myself" (Ecc 2:15)? He concludes that this too is *hevel*.

2:16. We tend to underestimate our old foe, death itself. Solomon laments that death has the power to erase the very memory of your existence. Is anything more dehumanizing than wiping your very existence from the chronicles of time? Death has the power to do that – and Solomon says it is waiting for all of us (Ecc 2:14). Alexander the Great found this out through a friend of his, Diogenes, who was a philosopher and was standing in a field staring at a large pile of bones. When Alexander the Great asked him what he was doing, Diogenes replied, "I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves."⁹ Death has the power to do this, and you are 24-hours closer than you were yesterday.

2:17. Solomon then expresses his disdain for the results of his inquiry. Some seem puzzled by the stark reaction. Does Solomon really hate life? In the Hebrew, the word life is *plural*. This speaks not to life itself, but Solomon hated the totality of life; the results.¹⁰ Should we expect anything else? Should we expect that Solomon is going to

⁸ Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (Random House, 2016).

⁹ John Blanchard, *Where Do We Go from Here?* (Evangelical Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁰ Brian Borgman, *Don't Waste Your Breath* (Free Grace Press, 2023), 41–42.

find the purpose and meaning of life in the pursuit if wisdom without God? In a fallen world that God has cursed, is Solomon going to find the meaning and purpose where God has designed the fallen world to provide no ultimate meaning and purpose?

We should expect nothing less than Solomon's deep hatred of the totality of life because:

“...it would hardly have been a divine curse if [Solomon] were passive about the Fall or loved its impact. That [Solomon] hates life, and the grueling nature of work on a cursed earth, was nothing less than the very design of God's judgment in the first place. God himself would have failed if [Solomon's] reaction to the realities of a temporary and tragic life was less than extreme hatred.

This is the result of life under the sun, *life without God*. It should not be surprising to us when people who refuse God's providence, who reject his sovereignty, who seek pleasure and purpose in temporal things, or who deny the very existence of God would react so strongly when they can't find comfort in the very things God made to point to himself. So, it is only reasonable that Solomon would not find meaning and purpose in wisdom apart from God.

Redemptive Focus

At this point, Solomon concludes this section in despair – which is only right. As the point has been made, to come to any other conclusion would mean that God himself would have failed. So, what should we make of Solomon's despair when he sees that wisdom is better than folly, but he fails to find ultimate purpose in wisdom? The wise die just like the fool. Solomon's problem of death remains.

Where's the line? So, what's the answer to Solomon's question? Where's the line between wisdom and folly? What's the difference between the sage and the stupid? Well, the line in this text can be seen when someone seeks to utilize wisdom in a way to possess the non-communicable attributes of God – such as omniscience or eternality. Wisdom would lead us to conclude we will never have those qualities.

The problem of death. Yet, Solomon's observation regarding the problem of death remains. Man must pass through physical death, but so did Jesus. By faith in Christ, although we will pass through the first death, we will not face the second death (Rev 20:14).

Conclusion and Summary

Not long ago, I was asked to speak at a funeral. At the conclusion of the eulogy, it was time for the interment. My wife was taking our five children home, and she asked me if the oldest children could come with me. Initially I didn't want to. It's such a sad thing to see a person buried. However, after thinking a minute on it, I thought it to be good that my children come along. It is good that they come along to see the problem that no man, no pharmaceutical company, and no billionaire could solve. Even if someone is determined not to die, that determination cannot prevent the inevitable. Jesus doesn't even guarantee deliverance from physical death. But only Jesus can deliver from spiritual death. God has not given man the ability to achieve immortality – *in this life*.

Having my children, and myself, observe someone being placed into the ground is a dose of reality. It's also a dose of wisdom. The reason it is wisdom is because it is designed to engender a fear of the Lord (Prov 9:10). Psalm 90 specially tells us that one of the purposes of death is that we would apply our hearts to wisdom (Ps 90:12). The apostle Paul writes, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). All of Solomon's wisdom, his inquiries, and results are to point you to Jesus, the manifest wisdom of God. He delivers us from the fear of physical death and grants us eternal life by freeing us from spiritual death through his resurrection.

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