

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the gospel according to Ecclesiastes

*“No Remembrance of the Wise”
Ecclesiastes 2:12-17*

Let's pray together to start our time in the Word.

When I was in junior high or high school, I learned to make mazes. I know that might sound weird to many people, but I didn't have an iPod; so, I made mazes! I would spend a lot of time to try to make the maze very difficult. In creating mazes, I could then appreciate if a friend made one more difficult than mine.

I'm sure most of you have tried to figure out a maze before, right? You get a pencil (not a pen), and you start. You take a turn. If you hit a dead-end, you go back to the last turn and move from that point. If you hit another dead-end, you go back to the previous turn.

You know, I think that's kind of how many of us think, too. When you're trying to figure out a problem and you think you might be on the wrong track, you go back to see where you think you made an error in your thinking. Maybe you're in an argument with someone else and at the start, you think you disagree, but then over time you realize this argument is going nowhere. They're not listening to you and then you realize that you're not listening to them. What do you do then? Dig your heels in the sand? Well, you can do that, but that's not going to help. Take a step back. Go back to the beginning. Re-think what was said. Seek to clarify. Oh how many needless arguments I've had with people because I realize we were saying the same thing in different ways, or I didn't hear what they were saying at first.

In a myriad of ways, we tend to “go back to the sources” in order to figure things out when we feel we're at a dead-end. Whether it's in our studies or in relationships or in trying to evaluate the meaning of life or being a sociologist or a counselor. If we hit a brick-wall, we ought to say, “Let's take a step back again and return to the sources. Maybe we missed something.”

There was a popular TV show called *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and there was an episode in which the adults were discussing the meaning of life. At one point, Raymond's wife says that the meaning of life is simply to be a good person and to be nice to other people. Her husband, Raymond, responds by saying, “So God put people on this earth just to help people when he could have skipped people altogether?” Throughout this whole scene, you have people frustrated, and in the end of the scene, Raymond's wife simply says something like, “Maybe the point of life is know that there is one but never know what it is.”

Here's this 30-minute comedy show that seeks to address the meaning of life – understanding that it's a frustrating question for humans, and their conclusion is that we may never know. Now before you get frustrated with that response, I want to say that I think that Solomon actually affirms this (at least in one sense). I want you to open your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 2, and we're going to read verses 12-17 together.

¹² 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. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. ¹

Solomon starts off in chapter 1 to journey through answering the basic question of human existence, "What's the point?" He considers and considers and considers. He's already hit some walls, and so we get to 2:12, and Solomon essentially says, "I went back again." He sought to consider the difference between wisdom and folly by living ostentatiously in every way. That didn't come up with answers; so, he wonders if he didn't consider it correctly. He goes back to wisdom and folly and here evaluates from a broader perspective. By the way, when Solomon says, "madness and folly," the idea is one in the same. It's not that he's evaluating three things, but he's evaluating two things. So, as one commentator put it, he's evaluating the difference between wisdom and mad folly. And by mad folly, I think he's referencing a more hedonistic, self-pleasure-focused way of life.

What's the difference between the two and what are the general pros and cons between the two? What Solomon is doing here is what any sociologist or scientist would do. He wants to know the general principle. If someone does this, what's the general result? If someone doesn't do this, what's the general result?

So, Solomon isn't content hitting the brick wall. He's tenacious in trying to find an answer as to what is the point of life, and right here he wants to know if either wisdom or foolishness will be better in coming to the meaning of life. Solomon goes back to see if he missed something. He did miss something, but he also realizes that he hits another brick wall. What Solomon finds is this: **"Under-the-sun wisdom is beneficial, but it cannot grant eternal significance."**

When I say "under-the-sun wisdom," I'm trying to use Solomon's wording in this book. Recall that this word for "wisdom" is a general term. I don't believe that he here is referring to God-fearing wisdom, but merely man-centered wisdom. It's a type of discernment simply based on what you can see around you. Solomon is wondering if that kind of wisdom can give you the meaning, significance, and life you're looking for. Clearly this is the kind of wisdom he's talking about because in the previous section, he describes sinful activity with regret and yet talks about maintaining "wisdom." In addition, in this section of Ecclesiastes (from 1:12 to the end of chapter 2), God is mentioned at the beginning and end, but not in the middle. We're still in the middle of this section with no mention of God. This obviously means that Solomon was continuing to try to figure out if the things around him would be the answer to the point of life.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:12–17.

Solomon is still thinking “under-the-sun.” But why does he care so bad about figuring this question out. I mean, so many people would probably give up before this. In our day, many people might watch a 30-minute comedy sketch and think, “Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one confused.” And then they’d flip to another station and be done. The questions may still arise, but they simply figure they’ll *never know*. Why doesn’t Solomon think this way and give up? Solomon gives another reason why he thinks it’s so important to continue this pursuit.

Look at the end of verse 12: For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.² This verse in the Hebrew is actually quite confusing in its literal rendering, but I think the ESV has a potential helpful translation. There are some different viewpoints on this, but I’m simply going to give the one I believe most plausible. The word “For” builds off of the previous statement. In other words, Solomon went back to consider wisdom and madness “for what can the man do who comes after the king?” In other words, “What’s the job of the next guy after the king?” His job is to be wise as well. Well, if Solomon is the wisest man yet, and if it’s part of the job description of a king to be wise, then it would make sense that Solomon would want to pass down his wisdom to the next generation.

What else is King and Preacher Solomon going to do with his wisdom? Even though he was so self-focused and hedonistic, he still has a concern for the next generation. So, he turns back to evaluate between wisdom and mad folly, but he doesn’t get so specifically engaged in all the activities. Sociologist Solomon takes a step back and evaluates. His first finding is that:

1. Under-the-sun wisdom brings greater benefit than foolishness (vv. 13-14a).

Look at verse 13 again with me: ¹³Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.³

This might almost sound shocking to us because Solomon has seemed so negative up to this point. Vanity, vanity, vanity, vanity, all is vanity! And then he says “wisdom is better than folly.” Wait a second, what?! I thought it was vanity. Now it has some benefit?

Again, let me reiterate that just because something is vanity, doesn’t mean that it’s completely worthless. The word for “vanity” refers to a mist or breath. It’s vaporous. Just because it’s a mist doesn’t mean that it has no benefits. It just means that life is a vapor and our days are numbered.

So, within these “numbered, evil, mist-like” days, does wisdom of mad folly bring a human greater benefit? This is something that I think many Christians fail to answer correctly. I’ve heard some Christians say something like, “Don’t expect a non-Christian to act like a Christian.” But they say that in regards to morality. Or, we say things like, “Christian marriage” instead of saying “marriage” because for whatever reason we think that marriage is secluded to the religious. Hold on a second, is a moral person the same as a godly person? Wait a second, did God create marriage for the entire human race’s good or just for the good of Christians? Of course, followers of Jesus can rejoice in God’s intention for the human race to greater degrees, but people can be moral and not godly, and morality will still be better for the person. In case you have a hard time with this, think of it this way: we don’t say, “Don’t expect that guy to not murder your kids. After all, he isn’t a Christian.” Ok, I know this world is falling apart and sinners

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:12.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:13–14.

will sin in all sorts of ways. And I know that living “under-the-sun,” is full of vanity. But does that mean that I shouldn’t want to help people to know the difference between wisdom and immorality? Should I not care about my unbelieving children’s actions and not teach them the difference between right or wrong?

Solomon says here that it’s to people’s general welfare to be moral as opposed to immoral. So, in his wanderings up to this point, he’s come to one conclusion: wise living is better than foolish living. This is one of the first major conclusions of Solomon, and this point will follow throughout the rest of the book. One commentator records the different ways Solomon emphasizes the importance of wisdom by summarizing Solomon’s teaching in Ecclesiastes. Solomon tells us that **“To possess wisdom will give success (10:10), preserve life and protect (7:12). It gives strength (7:19) and joy (8:1), and is better than mere brute strength (9:1). Man . . . toils by it (2:21), tests and weighs experiences by it (7:23). Even the practical politics of delivering cities involves wisdom (9:15). Limited it may be, but it is still indispensable” – Michael Eaton (Eaton, p. 81).**

For all kings and rulers who come after him, may they know and embrace the truth that it’s good for society for people to be moral. Now Solomon gives two examples to express how much better wisdom is than folly. The first example has to do with the contrast between light and darkness. The second is a contrast between being able to see or being blind. These are straightforward illustrations.

There are many nights I wake up in the middle of the night and need to get out of bed. Have you ever had it happen when you’re walking to the kitchen and maybe on your way around your bed, you hit your foot on something? Or maybe as you get close to the bathroom, a Lego was on the ground and it felt as though your foot had been impaled? But it’s not merely that light helps to keep you from hurting yourself. It helps you to make the right decisions. Have you ever tried to find what you’re going to wear without the light on? You know, you don’t want to wake your wife up so you squint in the drawers and you think you got the right shirt only to discover you got it all wrong. I mean, you got a shirt, but it doesn’t match anything. You know, it might be better to turn on the light or maybe even turn on your phone’s light? This is the idea with Solomon’s illustration. Light, for so many reasons, is better than darkness. And wisdom, for so many reasons, is better than living as an immoral fool.

The next illustration presses this point even further, though. He says, “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.”⁴ The idea is that to have your eyes in your head would refer to your eyes working. You can see. You can evaluate. You can discern certain things. But the fool, the immoral, doesn’t have those same abilities. Just like someone who is blind can do many things, so it is with the fool. They can do many things, but yet we also recognize that the one who is blind also has certain limits. I love how one man named Douglas O’Donnell said, **“It is better to play the game of life with our eyes in their sockets rather than in our pockets” – Douglas O’Donnell (O’Donnell, p. 57).** While that might over-extend the illustration, it’s still helpful. Where do you want your eyes? Do you want to use the eyes of wisdom or do you want to walk around life with your eyes blinded to things around you? The difference between wisdom and mad folly is the difference between night and day.

At this point, some of you could say, “Amen, Solomon! Thank you for finally saying something positive.” But don’t get too excited. Solomon is quick to bring us back to the reality of “under-the-sun” living and thinking. He comes to this conclusion, but he also has a second conclusion:

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:14.

2. Under-the-sun wisdom cannot give eternal significance because death takes away the wise (vv. 14b-16).

Let's read 14b-16 again together: "And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵Then 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. ¹⁶For 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!"⁵

And yet. Or in modern vernacular, it's like when you hear someone say, "Yeah, but. . ." Solomon hit the brick wall while living for intense pleasure and takes a step back to evaluate wisdom and folly. He sees the benefit of wisdom and then comes against another brick wall. Wisdom has its benefits, but it doesn't fulfill our ultimate yearning for significance and meaning.

Why doesn't it give significance and meaning? Well, Solomon says that the same event happens to everyone. What's the same event? Some could say that Solomon is simply saying that you can work hard and be moral and yet you can still have troubles in life. That could be the case, but I actually think Solomon is being even more specific here. I think he's talking about death. That seems the context of what he's saying. He says it's the same event that happens to *all*. Therefore, it will happen to him, too. He's not going to escape it. Then Solomon finally says at the end of verse 16 that the wise dies just like the fool.

Death is the great leveler. The psalmist says in Psalm 49:10, ". . . even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish. . . ." ⁶You can be the wisest person and that won't protect you from obscurity. Wisdom won't mean you're "on the top" or "king of the hill." You will die. There's a story about Alexander the Great. A friend of his, named Diogenes, who was a philosopher, was once in a field alone looking at a pile of bones. Alexander asked him what he was doing and Diogenes said, "**I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves**" – Diogenes (from T.M. Moore *as quot.* in Ryken, p. 63).

Sooner or later, you're indistinguishable from the worst of sinners even if you were considered by Time magazine as one of the top 50 most influential people in the world. When you view wisdom or foolishness against the black hole of death, and if you don't have God at all in view, you can recognize morality is "better" in certain ways, but you still walk away saying, "What's the point?" We as humans believe that we're here for something more, something greater. Solomon alludes to that here. He's seeing vanity in wisdom because he thinks he should get something more from wisdom. And the one thing Solomon pinpoints here is "remembrance." At least let the wise have renown! Let their works go on so that the wicked are silenced. But Solomon says that the wise will be forgotten. There's no remembrance in them or the wicked. So, while in this life we can say earthly wisdom is better than mad folly, at death we could say, "Neither helped this person." So the wise and the fools are put on the same plane.

If I were to boil down Solomon's statement here, I think he's saying what many of us have said throughout our lives when we feel we should get something and we didn't get it. The Timothy Durey paraphrase of these verses is: NO FAIR! And in some sense, Solomon makes sense. I mean, if wisdom is

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:14–16.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 49:10.

of greater value, why wouldn't we end up with something a little better than the fools? Why let death silence both? It seems unfair.

But maybe Solomon is making too much of "under-the-sun" wisdom. Maybe he's looking for smarts and knowledge to give him more than what it was intended to give. You see, when Solomon says that wisdom brings gain, but it cannot keep you from death, he's saying that wisdom gives something, but it doesn't give everything. So, what about you? Do you realize that living wisely isn't going to give you the significance your soul yearns for? Now, you may say, "I don't look for significance." But try again. We all do. We all want to be good (or great) at something. You want to do great at your job. Or maybe you just want to feel joyful in doing your job. If you don't feel happy, you don't do it. You want to be an awesome mom or you at least want to find satisfaction in being a mom. You want to be affirmed by others and when you're ignored or put down, you feel like less of a person. In any of these scenarios (and more), we tend to look to earthly wisdom to figure out how we can do better and grasp at some type of feeling of significance. Then Solomon pulls our heads out of the sand and he says, "Look at what's coming: death." Who cares if your kids brushed their teeth every night and had no cavities. Who cares if you climbed the top of the ladder at work. Who cares if you were really nice to everybody you talked to. Who cares if you lived out your dreams. A nightmare is coming. Blackness. Darkness. Death.

Hopefully we see the bleak picture Solomon's painting here. And it is bleak because Solomon then says in verse 17, "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind."⁷ He hated life. The things that he sees around him can never give him what he's yearning for. Go back to the *Everybody Loves Raymond* scene. The wife comes to the end and she essentially says humans will always ask and never know. This is what Solomon is saying. He keeps hitting dead ends, and while he may be able to come to some conclusions, none of the conclusions give him the final answer. None of the conclusions give him what his soul wants. He's parched with thirst. He needs a stream of living water and all he can get are droplets that taunt his pain.

I can't say for sure that Solomon is depressed when he says that he hates life, although I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case. I can say that it seems as though he's grieving the fact that this world and the things in this world cannot save him. Even though he created a secular garden of Eden with all delights, he still recognizes the void. He also recognizes that wise living won't change the brokenness of this fallen world. As one person writes of Solomon's statement, "The Preacher tells us plainly that he hates this state of things. This state of things grieves him. He watches the news and weeps. He himself sins against others and longs for an end to this way of doing life. We read the news. We bury our children. Murders, thefts, bribes, fists, weapons, sex, lies, and weather patterns are used to brutalize people. We watch the raping world. We hate that what God created good has become like a rusty-nailed playground no longer fit for kids at play and cutting the skin of those who try. We hate this. The wise cannot pretend that all is well" (Eswine, p. 87).

Can you resonate with Solomon? You see that whatever you do won't get you out of the rat race and all you do only reminds you that death is coming faster. To seemingly add insult to injury, the fools seem to be fine while you're feeling horrible. Do you ever say "not fair?" I can't help but wonder how many times we look to the things around us to give us meaning and significance. You may not look to wisdom or morality. You may look to a person or money or food or power. Now, how can you know if you're looking to something in this world to save you and give you all your soul is yearning for? Answer: when that thing disappoints you, it doesn't just feel like disappointment, it feels like your life is spiraling out of

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:17.

control and you say, “I hate life.” Or, “just let me die.” When the thing you idolize doesn’t follow through and it’s under threat of death, You want to die as well. It didn’t save you and because it couldn’t save you, what’s the option for you? Death. So, with Solomon you say, “I hate life.”

Many other have come to this same conclusion. The philosopher Voltaire once wrote to a friend saying, “I hate life, and yet I am afraid to die.” Then there was a Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1952, Francois Mauriac. He wrote, “You can’t imagine the torment of having had nothing out of life, and of having to look forward to nothing but death, of feeling that there is no other world beyond this one, that the puzzle will never be explained.” (both quotations from Ryken, p. 64). We can even live in one of the freest nations in this modern world, and while we’re grateful and we will celebrate this week; we also realize our hope is not in this nation. It’s broken. It’s falling apart in so many ways. Even Jesus teaches us that we can’t save our societies. We’re salt, not saviors. Which means, we can give good taste and we can seek to hold back decay, but in the end, the world is on a trajectory against God.

When we realize these things, we can wonder, “Did God create this world so that we could know some good things, and then die? What’s the point?” It’s right here that I want us to see how Solomon spurs us on to ponder the gospel? You see, if “under-the-sun” wisdom doesn’t give us what we’re yearning for, let’s now look above the sun. Paul says in Colossians we’re not to evaluate things on the basis of what we see, but instead, he says we are to set our minds on things above. So, I want you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 1. This passage points us above the sun, and here we see that **God’s wisdom (i.e. – Jesus) gives eternal gain, significance and remembrance**. Paul tells us that while earthly wisdom still dies, but there is a greater wisdom that is eternal. To go 1 Corinthians 1 and look in verse 20. I hope the words breed hope in your soul as we discover the gospel’s response to Solomon’s despair. Look at verse 20:

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.⁸

Paul differentiates between man’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. He says, “Where’s the wise?” And then Paul says that those people, if they depend on their own wisdom, will not find life. They won’t find the significance they’re yearning for. In fact, they’re going to think anything other than their wisdom is foolish. But Paul then says that the wisdom of God “Christ crucified.” Or even more generally, Paul says that Christ is the power and wisdom of God.

How can Jesus be greater than our wisdom? How can he be a greater benefit? Go into chapter 2 and look at verse 4:

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 Co 1:20–25.

my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.⁹

Jesus is greater than our wisdom and gives greater benefit because 1) Jesus takes us to God himself, and 2) because of Jesus, if you rest in him, depend on him, you are not doomed to pass away. Instead, you are decreed for eternal glory!

Solomon's looking in the wrong place for wisdom. If he stays there, he's going to continue to hit brick walls, and the same is true for you. Wisdom is found in Jesus. Colossians 2:3 says that in Jesus "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."¹⁰ And then in Colossians 3:3, we read that all who have turned from seeking identity, meaning, life from the things around us and have turned to Jesus, we are now "hidden with Christ in God."¹¹

Eternal glory is for those who trust Christ. And, by the way, the phrase "hidden" doesn't mean that we're not seen by God, but that word for hidden comes from the Greek word that is the basis for our English word "encryption." An idea of "hidden" is not that we're not going to be seen, but that God preserves us in his Son. All things essential to who we are for eternal glory will remain forever.

This answers Solomon's sorrow. If the wise just die, what's the point? But what Jesus tells us is that if you trust in him (and turn from trusting in even wisdom or morality) then you are kept, and you will always be remembered by the One who is Most High. To be remembered by God is to be remembered forever. What glory!

So, for those afraid of dying, for those tempted to hate life: Look above the sun to the Son! He came to this earth and died. But he didn't merely die, he took the punishment that sinners deserved. Now, whoever trusts in Jesus and recognizes that neither you (nor anything else) can save you, Jesus will rescue. Now, the Bible says that whatever you do in dependence on him and because of his love, it matters for eternity! From the smallest of details to the largest of actions, God is in control! So, with Paul we can say, **"To live is Christ and to die is gain!" Embracing God's wisdom (Jesus) leads to life, remembrance and glory! Praise his name. This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.** And with that let's move into communion this morning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR THE *What's the Point* SERIES

1. Provan, Iain. *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.
2. O'Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Reformed Expository Commentary: Ecclesiastes*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014.
3. Ryken, Philip Graham. *Preaching the Word: Ecclesiastes*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.
4. Eaton, Michael A. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009.
5. Eswine, Zack. *The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014.
6. Kidner, Derek. *Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Ecclesiastes*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 Co 2:4–7.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Col 2:3.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Col 3:3.