

Topic	The Teacher's Search for Meaning
Reference	Ecclesiastes 1:12 ~ 2:26
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These 44 verses before us are an expansion of what we heard last Sunday when we saw how the writer opens chapter 1 with a sense of frustration as he famously proclaims “meaningless, utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless” or in the King James Version, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”. Because he sees in Chapter 1:4 how generations come and go and he likens it to rising and the setting of sun, to the blowing of wind, to the flowing of rivers into the sea. We are born, we live and we die, human life is a cycle and the writers sees nothing but futility and weariness in the pointless pursuits of life.

In our text today, the writer would explain in depth why he comes to this sad conclusion about life or rather the meaning of life. You can detect a deep sense of pessimism and Sinicism as he wrestles with big questions such as;

- what is the point of it all?
- why was I even born?
- what is the purpose of living?
- and where can I find meaning?

Incredibly, such questions which were implicitly asked by the writer some 3000 years ago are still as relevant and common today as they were in ancient times.

Three weeks ago me and my wife were in Taipei for a short holiday. On the second day I found myself in a crowded train and so I was standing in this train packed with passengers when suddenly an elderly lady, older than me stood up and offered me her seat. Now I may deny that I am old, I may think I am still young but she saw me as old and frail. The inescapable fact is that, with each year passing we are getting one step closer to our journey on earth. With each birthday we are inch closer to the grave and the reality of death is very explicit in the middle of chapter 2. Now another way of putting that thought across is this saying.

*Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Make it a good one.*

But I wish to purpose to you especially in the context of Ecclesiastes that today is the first day of the rest of your life and something you need to think about deeply, because you are going to decide what you are going to do about it.

Whenever since I have crossed the half century mark of my life, I have thought long and hard about life and the meaning of life. When I was younger I had no time for such philosophical

exercises. I was too busy doing things my way, getting a degree, advancing my career, getting married and raising my children and with that largely behind me now over the past eight years or so the matters concerning my faith have become very important to me.

According to the Department of Statistics the average lifespan of a Malaysian-Chinese male is 75.0 years and for a Malaysian-Chinese female it is 79.9 years. So if I divide 58 by 75, that is if I live to 75, I am in the last quarter of my life and at a quicken pace my way is increasingly being replaced by God's way but I don't wish to give you the conclusion of the sermon so soon.

In any study of Ecclesiastes, one question is often asked, who exactly is the author of the book, who calls himself the Teacher and this is the repeat of chapter 1:1 where it says "the words of the teacher." Now the traditional view is that the teacher is none other than King Solomon because it says in chapter 1 verse 12

**I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.**

This is again echoed in chapter 1:1,

**The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:**

Solomon was indeed king of Israel and he was also the son of David, but there are many Bible scholars who back to defer the argue that the author is someone who assume the character of Solomon, someone who wrote as if he was Solomon but this debate has no great impact on our study, but for our purpose today we will just take the view that the writer was Solomon.

Our text is divided into four segments.

### **First Segment:**

In the first segment chapter 1 verses 12 to 18 we see why the teacher is so pessimistic and cynical in the earlier verses, because he has been thinking very hard about all the activities that human beings are engaged in. In verse 13 he says

**13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.**

He has been using his intellect to consider what is going on in this world. In verse 14 he says

**14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun;**

Next the teacher even thinks about wisdom itself and the opposite of wisdom which is madness and folly.

**17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly,**

In other words, he was using his wisdom to consider wisdom and also the lack of wisdom, but each time he comes disappointed. Whether he contemplates the world around him using wisdom

or whether he considers wisdom itself the conclusion is the same; chasing after the wind. All are devoid of meaning, he sees them as hollow.

Now the phrase chasing after the wind should be rightly translated as herding the word. It is an agricultural term with domestic animals, you can chase after them and place them into a pen but how do you gather the wind that is the meaning of chasing after the wind. It is an impossible task, a futile endeavor.

Verses 13-15 and then verses 16-18 are somewhat parallel. In each case the Teacher sets out by thinking really hard, I applied my mind he says, but each time he comes to the same depressing conclusion of chasing after the wind and each time he makes it even more depressing by sighting a negative proverb

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

**18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.**

What is crooked cannot be straightened simply means that we live in the fallen world and there is nothing you can do to right it. What is lacking cannot be counted is to say what is missing cannot be recovered from the New Living Translation and it is complementary to first phrase as it means what is deficient cannot be made whole.

In verse 18, the teacher finds the searching for meaning using his wisdom to be such an unhappy business so much so that wisdom brings much sorrow and knowledge results in more grief. In other words, the more you think about it the sadder you become. So do you think that we should stop thinking, should we forget about wisdom and knowledge as implied by the writer. My friends sometimes tell me that I am cursed with a mind that thinks too much. Ignorance is bliss they advise me, don't think too much. Certainly there are times when you are better of not doing something that I agree, but there are times when verse 18 rings through.

### **Golden Rule of Life**

Everything in moderation, avoids the extreme and excessive of life and then you will be okay.

At times ignorance is bliss but most times wisdom and knowledge will do you a lot of good. More often than not it is better to know than not to know. For example, if your car breaks up faulty it is better for you to know and do something about it. If you have a tumor in your body then it is very important that you know so that you can seek early treatment and hence in verse 18 in saying that wisdom brings much sorrow and knowledge more grief, the teacher is not dismissing the benefits of wisdom and knowledge, it is just his way of underscoring his deep sense of frustration about that his wisdom and knowledge have failed to provide him the answers that he seeks regarding the meaning of life. The teacher considers himself to be very wise from verse 16.

16 I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.”

But with the extent of his wisdom the teacher still fails to find answers to the meaning of life and that makes him even more frustrated. In fact, earlier he has already expressed his sense of despair in verse 13.

**What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!**

Indeed in the KJV this segment is given the title, ‘the grief of wisdom’ and this sets the stage for the remainder of our text which will be easier to digest.

### **Second Segment: (Pleasures are Meaningless)**

In the following three segments which are in chapter 2 the teacher sets out to try out three experiments to see if all indeed is vanity, if indeed everything is meaningless. He decides to venture out to confirm whether his earlier conclusions about life are true, perhaps somewhere out there he could find something more substantial. He says in verse 3b

**I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.**

So in the second segment from chapter 2 verse 1 to 11 the teacher starts to engage in all kinds of pleasure that the world could possibly offer. Verse 1 says

**1 I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.”**

Further down in verse 10

**10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.**

So he decides to indulge himself to enjoy life to the maximum and what does he do in this experiment that is this catalogue of his activities from verse 3 to verse 8, all kinds of pleasure he starts to sample. In verse 3 he tries alcohol and some silly stuff that come with it. He tries to cheer himself with wine. From verses 4-6 the teacher undertakes several building projects. He builds for himself houses complete with vineyards and gardens with parks and pools. He seeks to delight himself in dwellings of much splendor and luxury and this piece of property would be something similar into this time. In verse 7 the teacher who is obviously very wealthy then fills his mansions with male and female slaves, to serve him and to wait upon him. What good are all his lovely mansions without the human accessories. The teacher continues with his experiment. Next in his list he acquires herds and flocks to a scale that her never been seen before.

Next the teacher tries to amass gold and silver and various other treasures, perhaps it will make him feel happier to be able to feel and touch his wealth. The modern equivalent of this would be the money we keep in our bank.

It seems that pleasures of alcohol, mansions, servants, cars and money still leave the teacher empty and so now he has male and female singers coming to entertain him with songs and music, may be they can cheer him up.

So after a long experiment possibly stretching a lifetime, the teacher tries the lust pleasure of life, which is said to be the highest pleasure which is sexual gratification. He acquires a harem, described here as the delights of a man's heart. Indeed, in 1-Kings 11:3 we read that King Solomon has 700 wives and 300 concubines and so it was quite a harem with 1000 women to please him. Incidentally the word harem comes from the Arabic word 'hareem' which means prohibition and it refers to the section of the palace where the concubines are kept into which other man except the king are forbidden to enter and that is why the word 'hareem' means prohibition. When it comes to sexual pleasures, King Solomon went to the extreme thinking that it will satisfy him. Now although not to the extent of Solomon there is no shortage of modern examples of man living promiscuous lifestyle, having multiple partners, keeping numerous mistresses or visiting prostitutes.

The desires of man have not really changed in 3000 years. People today behaves more or less the same way as their ancestors did centuries ago and the teacher being very wise, he knew this in his time and that is why he says earlier in chapter 1 verse 9

**What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.**

Just as the teacher discovered the worldly pleasures left him empty, similarly people today have discovered, are discovering or will discover that the pleasures of physical kind will result in emptiness. The teacher knew what he was saying because he tried all kinds of pleasures.

At the end of his experiment on pleasures the teacher makes a sad conclusion in verse 11

**11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.**

In short, nothing left him with a sense of purpose and actually he knew this at the beginning of this segment because earlier he wrote in verse 1b but that also proved to be meaningless and he continued in verse 2

**2 "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?"**

He does not mean that you shouldn't laugh. He is not disapproving laughter per se, but he was speaking against the laughter of pleasure rather than the laughter of joy.

Now many of us already know that we cannot find purpose in the pleasures of this world. They only result in emptiness. Apparently this emptiness grows exponentially as you approach the end of your journey on earth and many of us know there is more to life than what the material

world can offer and that is why we come to church every Sunday and on other days as well, hoping to find something deeper, something more substantive, but there are many out there who persists in their mistaken belief that worldly pleasures can satisfy their soul and they can be your spouse or your children or your parents and I pray that God will guide you to reach out to them, to open their eyes to the deeper truths of life.

### **Third Segment: (Wisdom and Folly are Meaningless)**

Having found out to his despair that worldly pleasures are devoid of meaning, the teacher tries another experiment in the third segment of our text, verse 12 to 16. Earlier in the first segment we have already seen how the teacher was so disappointed that for all his wisdom he couldn't figure out the meaning of life and he became very depressed but in this second experiment he has a new thought that although wisdom and knowledge may have filled in far as the big questions in life are concerned but may be intellectual activities can bring me some meaning. If the pursuits of worldly pleasures are futile may be reading and learning, acquiring knowledge and gaining wisdom can bring me some joy and fulfillment.

In this second experiment the teacher ventures out to consider wisdom and its opposite madness and folly. He wants to test out wisdom and knowledge like how he tested pleasures and low and behold in verse 13 he finds that wisdom is better than folly. Just as light is better than darkness, which is not unexpected for me at least because he associates wisdom with light, folly with darkness and then he appends a proverb in verse 14

**14 The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness;**

In other words, wisdom is more superior to folly, it is more beneficial to be wise than to be foolish so that we don't walk in darkness. Darkness here includes spiritual darkness and this certainly squares with the teacher's other teachings about wisdom and folly elsewhere in the Bible. For example, in Proverbs 13:20

**Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.**

So far all well in good but wait the teacher suddenly hits another snack. He suddenly realizes that both the wise and the foolish suffer the same fate. From verses 14b and 15a, he is talking about death. Whether you are wise or foolish, clever or stupid you will die one day, death is the ultimate equalizer, everyone ends up in the grave and he writes at the end of the passage.

**Like the fool, the wise too must die!**

This in itself is not nothing profound we all know this, although we don't want to talk about it. It is part of the natural cycle of life. What the teacher concludes in the next part is what we need to know. In verse 16 he observes that after they are long gone both the wise and the foolish will not be remembered, say two or at most three generations later and what is the point then if your wisdom will be forgotten by your descendants, if your knowledge will be erased by the sand of

time. That is why the teacher arrives at the same set of conclusion as the earlier experiment. He laments in verse 15b

What then do I gain by being wise?" I said to myself, "This too is meaningless."

#### **Fourth Segment: (Toil is Meaningless)**

After testing out pleasures and wisdom and ending up this illusion he comes to the last experiment 'toil of work', to see if it will provide him some meaning. Now if you are a type who is married to the job, who puts in long hours into the business this last segment will be very relevant to you. This segment covers chapter 2 verses 17-23. We see all over the passage that the teacher describing the work to be tough and demanding. He says in verse 17

the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

In verse 20 he talks about my toilsome labor under the sun. In verse 22 all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? To him work is grief and pain from verse 23.

Now those of us who have been working very hard can understanding this. It is not easy to put food on the table that the long hours, the deadlines, the meetings, the pressure etc. and generally Asians especially the Chinese, they work too hard, but among the major ethnic groups in the country strangely the Chinese enjoy the longest average lifespan and sadly the Indian male in this country has the shortest lifespan. The Chinese work very hard and yet they live longer. The Chinese really enjoy working and derive a lot of satisfaction from making a lot of money and hence the teacher here in this last segment has something to say especially to the Chinese.

In this last segment he has two issues he has two issues about deriving satisfaction or meaning from work. First in verse 18 he complains that after toiling in the sun, after so much struggle, all that he has worked so hard for he says

18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

Which is not too bad because after all they are your children and grandchildren. His issue is in verse 19

19 And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil

Meaning there is a good chance that his son or his son's son will squander away his wealth. His second issue is in verse 21

21 For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it.

This is his second problem and taking a cue from this verse my wife and I have told our children over the years that mommy and daddy will be spending most of our money, not leaving much for them. We plan to spend it on traveling to see the world, because we love to travel and perhaps give away the rest to charity. The kids have to work for their own living and fund their own lifestyle.

So on these two counts in verse 18-21, the teacher finds work to be meaningless and he says this not once but four times in this segment. He even describes it to be great misfortune, in short work like pleasures and wisdom cannot satisfy the soul. And all physical pursuits of life are meaningless, chasing after the wind, nothing make sense to him.

Now the critical lesson behind all these three experiments by the teacher can be sum up by the words of this millionaire surgeon who lived and worked in Singapore. The late doctor Richard Teo. He ran a hugely successful cosmetic surgery clinic in Singapore and he really lifted it up. He was young and good looking, had plenty of money. He was in the fast cars and had celebrities for company and he really love his high society lifestyle and that went on until early 2011 when Dr. Teo was diagnosed with terminal cancer and sadly he passed away the following year at the age of 40. Now the following is a part of transcript of his testimony in November 2011 to the dental Christian fellowship while he was undergoing treatment and he says

*“...in my death bed, I found no joy whatsoever in whatever objects I had – my Ferrari, thinking of the land I was going to buy to build my bungalow, etc, having a successful business. It brought me ZERO comfort, ZERO joy, nothing at all. Do you think I can hold onto this piece of metal and it’s going to give true joy? Nah, it’s not going to happen.” - from the testimony of Dr. Richard Teo, 24th November 2011*

Now against the backdrop of our text today, what we observe here is that five years ago this dying man learned the hard way exactly what the teacher discovered 3000 years ago that you are not going to find meaning and fulfillment in material world. Now this is the main message from our text. These four segments put together back that one question, they point to one great mystery which is,

- how and where can we find the true meaning of life?
- how can we live life meaningfully according to its real purpose?

But unfortunately the teacher does not exactly provide the answers in our text, not in chapters 1 and 2. You see, it is only at the end of the Book in the last chapter that the teacher leaves us with two clues to this mystery.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 **Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them”**

So first the teacher says to remember your creator. When you are young, not when you are already old, the earlier the better because the truth of the matter is you can only find true meaning of life in God. So the earlier you know him and relate to him the more meaningful your life is and longer you will live a meaningful life.

Coming back to the story of Dr. Teo you should know that he was baptized when he was 20, but he soon abandoned God to pursue his worldly dreams and to indulge in unrestrained enjoyment of the material world. This is another part from his testimony

*“I went to church for a while, after some time, I got tired. I said it’s time to... stop going to church. I had a lot more things to pursue – girls, studies, sports, etc. After all, I had achieved all these things without God today, so who needs God?” - from the testimony of Dr. Richard Teo, 24th November 2011*

The second clue is more instructive

Ecclesiastes 12:13 **Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.**

After all the thinking and pondering this is what you need to do, fear God and obey him. This is what life is all about at its core. The teacher calls it duty. Fear God is not to be scared of him, it means to revere him. If you revere God you would naturally keep his laws because the two go hand in hand, but this backs another question.

- Why is that the meaning of life can only be found in God.
- Why is that only God can provide the true meaning of life.

The answer is simple but deep. It is because we are created in the image of God. We are created to have a relationship with Him, to know Him and to revere Him, it is in our DNA. So when a thing made but it is not used according to his original design than all kinds of problems will creep in. You were made by God for a purpose and that purpose can only be found in God, the source of life and outside of God like the teacher found out, you will only find emptiness and futility. You will find meaning in life only if you conduct your life God’s way, God’s design and not your way or your design as I too have discovered over the years of life.

Again coming back to Dr. Teo. There is a last bit from his testimony, happily for him he found God in his dying days.

*“If I were to sum it up, I’d say that the earlier we sort out the priorities in our lives, the better it is. Don’t be like me – I had to learn it through the hard way... This has happened, it gave me a chance to come back to God. Few things I’d learnt though:*

*1. Trust in the Lord your God with all your heart...*

2. *Love and serve others, not just ourselves.*”

**- from the testimony of Dr. Richard Teo, 24th November 2011**

Having briefly discussed the true meaning of life, now we are ready to look at the fifth segment, just three verses at the end of the chapter where the teacher has little advice for us, for those who know God. He says in verse 24

**24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God,**

This verse may be clearer from another version which says, the best thing we can do is to enjoy eating, drinking and working, I believe these are God’s gifts to us. In other words, in the context of a relationship with God, of knowing God we can and should enjoy eating, drinking and working while acknowledging that these things are a gift from him. We should receive enjoyment as God’s gift to us.

The golden rule of life is everything in moderation. Make sure you are not enslaved by these things that they do not become little God’s in your life. Our text today ends on a happier note after all. The earlier pessimism and gloom give away to a measured and thoughtful perceptive about life in the minds of God’s people and the teacher adds in verse 25 and 26

**25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?**

**26 To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness,**

Meaning, outside of a relationship with God all physical pursuits of life will become burdensome, but those who acknowledge the sovereign God, He grants his good gifts of not only joy but also wisdom and knowledge.

- Do you know the one true living God?
- Do you revere Him?
- Do you have a relationship with your creator?

When I say a relationship I mean a close personal relationship where you can call him Abba father. Have you been struggling with these misplaced pursuits of life? Does your life lack the meaning and purpose you desire, may the words of the teacher encourage you to place your hope and trust in the Lord.