

Ecclesiastes

Almost everyone has heard of the book of Psalms in the Bible. The Psalms are songs that the nation of Israel used to use for their worship. They are poetry, but they are not the only poetry in Scripture. There is the book of Job, which tells the story of a rich man who loses everything. There is the book of Proverbs and Song of Solomon, both written by King Solomon, the son of King David. The other poetic book in the Bible is called Ecclesiastes.

The word “ecclesiastes” is a Latin word that means “member of the assembly” or “Preacher.” Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, who the Bible says was the wisest man ever. It was written when Solomon was nearing the end of his life. He, more than anyone, had the opportunity to do anything he wanted, and he took every advantage of that opportunity. Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, wants to answer the questions: “Where can I find contentment in my life? Where can I find happiness? Where is something truly fulfilling?” And he gives us a glimpse into his journey to find that sometimes unattainable goal. If you have a Bible, turn with me to the book of Ecclesiastes, found just after Proverbs, which is after the book of Psalms. Follow along as we look into this book of wisdom.

Solomon starts the book by proclaiming how everything in the world is vanity, or worthless. He is somewhat cynical, but he makes the case that from a purely natural way of looking at things, life is somewhat worthless. He says in chapter 1 verse 3: “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” What is the point of working, he asks, if there is always more work to do? This generation dies and another takes its place. At some point, you would think that the work would be done, but it is never done. The next generation comes and they work as well, and they are replaced by the next generation, and so on.

Moreover, Solomon states that all of man’s labor has not produced one new thing. He says in verse 10 “Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.” Oh, sure, it’s true that Solomon didn’t have the Internet or a fast car or a big screen TV. What Solomon is getting at is that what has not changed is the fact that we all look to entertaining, flashy things to make us happy. Solomon had chariots to make him happy, and still it didn’t. Solomon had a choir of singers to give him fulfillment, and it still didn’t. The specific toys might change, but what hasn’t changed is the fact that we all still look to toys to make us happy.

Solomon then flaunts his credentials, and tells us why he, more than anyone, is the best person to talk about how to find happiness. He says in Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 “I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.” He says in Ecclesiastes 1:16-17 “I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.”

Solomon realized that he had more than anyone else had ever had, and that if anyone had the wherewithal to make oneself happy, it was him. If you know your Bible, you know that Solomon was king when Israel was at its highest point. It was a time when Israel was at peace with its neighbors, a time that was rich spiritually, and a time of its greatest economy. 1 Kings 10 says “the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred threescore and six talents of gold, beside that he had of the merchantmen, and of the traffick of the spice merchants, and of all the kings of Arabia, and of the governors of the country. So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom. And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones, and cedars made he to be as the sycomore trees that are in the vale, for abundance.”

I say all of this to say that Solomon had the greatest chance anyone in history has ever had to have happiness. Yet we find Solomon saying instead, “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” This should come as no surprise. We see that anything we find that might bring happiness often doesn’t. Someone once asked millionaire J. Paul Getty: “How much money is enough?” He said, “Just one more dollar.” Let us look at Solomon’s journal and what he did to find happiness. Remember, however, that these answers may speak to your own life. Are the ways you are looking for joy succeeding or not?

Ecclesiastes chapter 2 talks about the fact that Solomon tried to find joy in giving himself everything he wanted. He says in verse 1 “I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure:” He tries first of all finding pleasure in alcohol. “I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men.” It’s funny that in hard economic times alcohol sales go up. People in despair run to the bottle for comfort. They come upon hard times, and their solution is to try to forget their problems. Drinking to forget problems may give you temporary pleasure, but when the effects of the alcohol wear off, you still have your problems and regret.

Solomon says in Proverbs 20:1 “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.” Finding pleasure in alcohol is unwise, and if you try to find your comfort in it, you have been lied to. You have been deceived. Proverbs 23:29-30 say “Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine.” That verse says that alcohol does not bring joy, but sorrow and contentions. No, there is no pleasure in alcohol.

Solomon goes on to say in chapter 2: “I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.”

Solomon tried to find pleasure in accumulating things. He built huge palaces and buildings for himself. He planted vineyards, gardens, and orchards for himself, so that he could enjoy the best foods. He made pools of water so that he always had enough cool water to drink, grow his trees, and to swim in. He got servants to do all of his work for him and give him anything he wanted. He bought many different things and had enough cattle to eat, more than anyone else in his entire kingdom. He got silver and gold, as well as unusual things like exotic animals. Solomon had the best entertainment: he hired people to sing and play for him. Anything that Solomon wanted or thought that he might want, he got for himself.

Now, most of us never have this opportunity. We want a boat that’s a little bigger, a house that’s a little nicer, and a car that’s a little faster. But we still accumulate stuff. Americans are among the richest people in the world, and we are the best at accumulating stuff. That’s why they call us “consumers.” The average American spends \$3400 a year on food, just to keep himself happy. 56% of the world lives in extreme poverty, and the average income is \$730 dollars a year, or \$2 a day. That means that Americans spend over four times as much on food as the average Third World citizen makes a year. That is saying nothing about the luxury items on which we spend our money, such as cosmetics, electronics, and furniture.

You might think with the advantages that Americans have that we would have the happiest people on Earth. You would think that we would be among the most satisfied, and that our modern conveniences have finally

brought about the kind of joy we have been waiting for, and for which Solomon sought. However, this is not the case. Statistics say that almost 20 million Americans suffer from depression, and that 15% of those who are depressed will commit suicide. Unhappiness in marriage has led to a rise in divorce levels. Unhappiness in our daily lives led doctors to write 232.7 million prescriptions for depression in 2007. We are not even satisfied with the things that our wealth has brought us. Solomon comes to the same conclusion. In Ecclesiastes 2:11 he says, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” Solomon did not find the happiness for which he was looking, and you cannot find true joy and satisfaction in that, either.

But Solomon is not to be outdone. He renews his efforts and in Ecclesiastes 2:12 says “And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.” Solomon seeks to get wisdom and education. He tries to find happiness in knowledge. Solomon feels that if he can understand the way that the world works, have enough information about the Earth, and then be able to apply that knowledge, he will find the satisfaction for which he has long been looking. Many people today try to do the same thing.

They spend years in school, trying to get degrees. They hope that a better degree will give them a better understanding of the world, or at least a well-paying job. Some people aren't as much interested in education as they are enlightenment. They travel the globe and seek experiences that give them an awareness of how the world works. Certainly the Bible is not opposed to this. When God put the first man on the Earth, he wanted Adam to experience everything that He had created. Later in Scripture, the Bible admonishes us: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” God is not opposed to us studying. There is nothing wrong with getting a good education, even a PhD. There is nothing wrong with traveling and gaining knowledge and experience. The problem comes when we think that those things satisfy. There can be some short-term joy in such things, but it will not produce enduring happiness because it cannot.

Solomon comes to this conclusion as well, and says, “Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.” Solomon realizes that wisdom and knowledge can carry a person only so far. It can give a certain sense of accomplishment, but ultimately, it does not completely satisfy. The clincher for Solomon's coming to this realization is the sobering reality of death. Solomon sees death as the #1 reason that wisdom and knowledge are ultimately unfulfilling.

He says, “For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool... For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.” Solomon says that ultimately, whether you are very learned or a babbling fool, you still end the same way: dead. The fact is that every person who lived in the 19th century is dead, whether he was very simple and foolish or whether he was a scientist. The beggar lies in the same kind of earth as the millionaire. The straight A student's body is in the same condition as the one who never finished 5th grade. Solomon sees this and realizes that after a person dies, his mind is no more, and cannot be revived.

This is a sobering truth, and one that should not be lost on us. All the things we may accomplish on this earth are good, but they are ultimately futile. Oh, there may be some important contributions that some have made, and some may have made mankind to advance in areas of science or medicine because of their knowledge, but it can do nothing for them personally now. Now those who have made great discoveries and died are still just dead. Solomon makes the point in a famous passage in chapter three that everything seems to be futile. He says in the first few verses of chapter 3: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A

time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” Solomon, in despair, concludes that ultimately, everything is useless.

Solomon goes from thinking, like so many of us, that pleasure brings true happiness, to thinking that death is the best thing. But now he considers what he is really saying, and at the beginning of chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, he says “Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.” Solomon says that the very best thing for a person is that they never be born at all. But he stops where he is and thinks about what he has said. It is impossible to wish for: that one had never been born. And anyway, that in itself is no answer, since it is impossible. Since we all do exist and must live this one life we’ve been given, how must we live? Solomon continues his journey in chapter 4: “Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.”

Solomon thinks and tries another idea. Solomon wonders if perhaps other humans are the answer. The king wonders if perhaps our joy can be found in relationships with others. This is a very astute observation, since it seems that everyone feels deep down a need and a craving for a relationship with another human being. Solomon himself was not exempt from this feeling. In fact, Solomon was famous for not only his wisdom, but for the fact that he had many, many wives. The Bible says in 1 Kings 11:3 that Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Solomon, through political marriages and through getting what he wanted, had some kind of relationship, no matter how shallow, with over 1000 different women. This says nothing for the relationships he had with his family and friends. Solomon, more than anyone, had opportunities for relationships, including, I might add, sexual relationships.

In Ecclesiastes he teases this notion out in chapter 4:9-10 “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.” Solomon extols relationships, and talks about the benefits of having other people in your life. Again, the Bible commends this. After God first made man, he then made woman, so that man would not be alone. Eve was created because Adam had no one. God puts an important emphasis on human to human relationships. He says in 1 John 4:7 “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.” We are not only encouraged to love others, but we are commanded to love each other.

In fact, the Bible puts such an emphasis on having relationships that Jesus Himself commanded us to restore lost relationships. He said in Matthew 5:44-45 “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.” God wants us to have relationships. The truth is, that is why we have church. That is why First Baptist Church exists. Friend, you ought to have a church family to whom you belong. You ought to worship regularly with others. Hebrews 10:24-25 say “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” That verse says that God does not want you to avoid assembling with others in church.

The purpose of church is not to fulfill religious duties. Many people go to church but have no relationship with those around them. God did not invent the idea of church as just another place to go, or just another requirement you need to meet in order to go to heaven. God created the church to help Christians encourage one another to grow spiritually. If you are not a part of a church, chances are that you are struggling with your Christian walk. Why? Because you need to be in relationship with other Christians. If you do not have a church family, I invite

you to attend our services this morning, starting at 10:30am. If you cannot make it this morning, please come tonight. We will be having a singing service starting at 6:00pm, and after the service we will be having a meal as a church family, but open and free to the public. If you would like to come, we would love to have you as our guest.

But Solomon, despite the abundance of relationships he had available, found that ultimately there was no fulfillment in these, either. He says in Ecclesiastes 4:15-16 "I considered all the living which walk under the sun. There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit." Solomon concludes, once again, that relationships are vain and ultimately unfulfilling. Why is this? One reason could be that the kinds of relationships Solomon were in were very shallow and based on the fact that he was a powerful man who could get what he wanted. But that conjecture does not really answer for you.

Is it true that the relationships in your life are ultimately fulfilling? My wife and I have known each other for ten years and have been married for over seven. I've never loved anyone more than I love Amy, and I've never loved her more than I love her today. We have always been able to resolve our disagreements, and we've never yelled at each other. She is the love of my life and "the wife of my youth." But I do not find my ultimate satisfaction in my marriage. Spouses bring joy and enhance our lives, but they cannot ultimately full them. If it were true for my wife that I was the only thing that brought her satisfaction, then what would happen when I die? What about the 20 years before we were married? Was there no possibility for her to be satisfied until she met me? Many men probably think so of themselves, but this cannot be true. We are only humans, and cannot fulfill anyone's lives more than we can fulfill our own. The truth is that it is unfair for you to expect another human being, real or imagined, to satisfy your life and give you the happiness that you want, because they are unable to do so.

This goes for any kind of relationship. I have three small children, and I love them very dearly, but they are not ultimately satisfying for me. They bring me happiness, but there are times they cause me grief. I was fulfilled before they were born, and I will be fulfilled when they leave my home. I have many friends, but they do not fulfill me. I enjoy the privilege of having my parents and one of my grandparents still alive, and I enjoy good relationships with my brothers and sister, but they are not my ultimate satisfaction. I am the pastor of a church of good people, but they are not my fulfillment. They do not bring me ultimate happiness. Try as you may, through community groups or through the Internet, you will not find the kind of joy for which you are looking with people.

"Ah," you say, "I see what you are driving at. You're going to say that I need to have more religion in my life. I need to go to church and do better." Friend, this is a good thing, but unfortunately, Solomon has tried this, too. He says in Ecclesiastes 5:1 "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil." Solomon says that it is not religious exercises that will bring you what you need. If you need proof of this, go ask someone who goes to church every Sunday and find out if their happiness is in church. Church is good, but it is not ultimate. However, you are very close.

I will cut to the end of Ecclesiastes since our time is coming to a close. He says in the second to the last verse in the whole book this: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Solomon says that the entire being of man rests in the fact that He must fear, or respect God, and do what He asks. This is obvious when you think about it. The first person mankind ever met was God. God was the first thing we saw. God wanted us to know that we were created to have a relationship with Him.

"I thought you said that already, though, Josh!" you are saying. Friend, there is a difference between doing religious exercises and having a personal relationship with the living God. There is a difference between finding fulfillment in a relationship with another human and having a relationship with God. There is a difference

between having knowledge of science and knowing God personally. The difference is immense, and Solomon finally found it. You see, the story of Solomon takes a tragic turn. The Bible says that in his later years all those wives of his convinced him that he needed to serve other gods, and he did. He had served God with his whole heart, even building Him a tremendous temple, and so knew the joy of knowing God. But later he found the foolishness of serving other gods. Many scholars believe that this book was written at the very end of Solomon's life, and it is proof that Solomon finally did turn back to God. He realized that the one time that he had the happiness for which he was looking was when he knew God.

How can you know God, then? Is it by doing what He asked? Yes, it is. That is what that last verse said. But what has God asked? Contrary to popular belief, God has not asked for a lot of religious nonsense. What does God want? He tells us in 1 John 3:23: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment." God says that what He wants you to do is believe on His Son. If you will believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and that your only hope of salvation is in Christ Jesus, you can be saved. The Bible says in John 3:18: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." You must trust Jesus for your salvation. The Bible says that when that happens, you will be "born again," which is something about which we talked a few weeks ago.

It is only then that you can find the ultimate happiness and joy for which you have been looking. The weight and guilt of sin will be off your shoulders, knowing you have been forgiven. This is not to say that true Christians never are sad or have bad days, but if your ultimate satisfaction is in God and the work of Jesus Christ, you will have a new sense of joy and peace. I leave you with one final verse before I close: "Philippians 4:7 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Friend, it is our wish that you come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. If you have any questions for us, please do not hesitate to contact us. You can do so in the following ways:

You can stop by our church building, which is located at 909 W. 8th St., by the softball diamonds. You can call us at 732-3321. You can E-mail us at church@fbcpr.org. That's CHURCH at F B C P R dot O R G. Or you can log on to our website, which is www.fbcpr.org. If you would like to have a copy of this broadcast, either in audio or transcript form, you can find it on our website tomorrow. I would like to once again invite you ladies who are interested to our ladies Bible study. It meets every Monday for the next several weeks at our church building from 11:45 to 12:30. Feel free to bring a lunch with you and study the book of Ruth with us. Please join us again next week for the Way of Truth Radio Broadcast, brought to you by the First Baptist Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota.