

Creekside Community Church  
Enjoying Life in an Uncertain World: The Book of Ecclesiastes  
July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
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### **All Roads Lead to Nowhere**

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

One summer, my family went to an outdoor maze. Now, this particular maze was enormous. And, it was incredibly complex. In addition, it was about 143 degrees outside. And to this day, I don't know why anyone thought this was a good idea. It was torturous. We begin working through the maze. We're melting in this heat. We're totally confused. And to make matters worse, there's a water park. But it's at the end of the maze. So there's this oasis at the end of the desert. But we can't find it. It was a weird experience. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves. But we were miserable. Now, we're a bit competitive by nature. So, we started to cheat. We began climbing over walls, and under them. We asked people where to go. And then, we'd climb up to these observation towers. We'd get our bearings. And then, we'd find new ways to cheat. But nothing worked. We hit dead-end, after dead end. And eventually, we just left. And we walked over to the water park.

Today, we learn about Solomon's quest for meaning. He takes many different routes. But he never reaches his destination. He can't escape the maze of life. There's no happy ending. There isn't even a water park. Every route leads to the exact same place; to the dead-end of death itself.

We've just started a series on the book of Ecclesiastes. This is a strange book. In a sense, it's the most unbiblical book in the Bible. Ecclesiastes recounts Solomon's search for joy in the midst of misery; for certainty in the midst of mystery. And that's why we've entitled this series, *Enjoying Life in an Uncertain World*. Solomon attempts to construct a view of reality from the ground-up. He wants to find the answer; the "thing" that makes sense out of everything else. But he can't find it. He can't comprehend God's plan. He's disillusioned by life. And ultimately, he despairs of finding meaning. And that's the point. Ecclesiastes drives us to despair. But it also drives us to look for outside intervention; for outside meaning and outside help. Every part of this book drives us to God. We must trust in him. Only he can fix the unfixable. Only he can resolve the unresolvable. That's how the book ends. And we must read the entire book in light of this ending.

Last week, we read a summary of Solomon's message. At the outset, he presents his thesis. He declares that "everything is meaningless." The Hebrew word is "hevel." Solomon says that life is "hevel." It's fleeting. It's ephemeral. It's disappointing. And ultimately, it's absurd. And why does Solomon think this? Because nothing ever progresses. Nature endlessly repeats

itself. Desires never get satisfied. Memories are forgotten. Generations are replaced. Work is undone. And eventually, everyone dies. That was last week's sermon. And I hope you left uplifted and inspired.

In today's passage, Solomon reiterates his thesis. But he does so by sharing his personal experience. Solomon recounts his quest. He talks about the *roads* he travelled; the paths he took in pursuit of meaning. Then, he shares his *reaction*; he draws some conclusions based on his findings. And he ends in *resignation*. He can't find meaning, so he resigns himself to enjoy the transient blessings of life.

**A. Roads:** Let's start by looking at the various roads Solomon takes. He says, *"I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. <sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted."*

Solomon lists his royal credentials. In the Ancient Near East, it was common for kings to write a Royal Testament; an official record of their accomplishments. A king would introduce himself. And then, he'd list his achievements. Kings did this to proclaim their greatness; and, to secure their legacy. But Solomon mocks this literary convention. He lists his accomplishments. But he thinks they're worthless!<sup>1</sup>

Solomon devoted himself to the pursuit of meaning. He *"set [his] mind"* to it. That word *"mind,"* occurs 12 times in this passage. Solomon isn't willy-nilly. His quest is intellectual. And it's highly intentional. It's also exhaustive. According to verse 13, he *"seeks"* and *"explores"* everything under the sun. Those words refer to the breadth and depth of his search.<sup>2</sup> Solomon leaves no stone unturned. He looks at as many things as he can. And he looks into them as deeply as possible. And as a king, he had the resources to do this. But what does he find? *Nothing*. Solomon isn't a master of suspense. He immediately reveals that his search was fruitless. He was merely chasing the wind. He couldn't catch meaning. And when he thought he had, it slipped through his hands. Solomon concludes that God has afflicted humanity. He has given humanity a grievous task. We'll return to that point at the end. Solomon then lists the paths he took. *"I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." <sup>17</sup> And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. <sup>18</sup> Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."*

According to 1 Kings 4, Solomon was the wisest man of his era. And he devoted his great

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Two Horizons Bible Commentary; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2011); 37.

<sup>2</sup> James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL: Westminster/John Knox: Philadelphia, 1987); 72.

intellect to the pursuit of meaning. According to verse 17, he took divergent routes. He set his mind to know wisdom *and* to know folly. In other words, Solomon tried it all. He traveled in opposite directions. He pursued meaning in knowledge and in ignorance. He tried self-denial. And he tried self-indulgence.

Initially, he pursues meaning through wisdom. He takes the high road. He tries to discern how the world works. And then he tries to live accordingly. But Solomon isn't merely interested in practical wisdom. He wants to plumb the depths of existence; to find the fundamental truths of life. And Solomon had every resource to do this.

This week, I read a story about Peter Thiel.<sup>3</sup> He's the CEO at PayPal. Recently, Thiel rented out a hotel on the Mediterranean coast. And then, he invited a group of brilliant thinkers to stay at the hotel. He invited physicists and philosophers, and tech-gurus. These people all had conflicting beliefs. And each of them presented papers, and debated with each other. And I thought, *"that's awesome! I want to be a rich tech-mogul."* Apparently, that's what you do with your free time? That's how I imagine Solomon. He's a brilliant man. And he has every resource at his disposal. He had the ability to search out any matter; to learn anything he wanted to.

And yet, his knowledge doesn't profit him. He says, *"in much wisdom there is grief. And increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."* Isn't that fantastic?! Students, that's a *great* verse to share with your teachers. Knowledge grieves Solomon. But why does it have this effect? I think there are two reasons.

Here's the first one: As we learn, we actually become more aware of our ignorance. We learn of new findings, and new areas of study. And we begin to sense the limitations of our knowledge. So as we learn, we also learn that there's more to learn; *far more*, in fact, than we'd previously assumed. And that can be discouraging! In college, I decided to take an upper-level philosophy class. And everyone in the class was a philosophy major, except for me. And that should've been a red flag. But it didn't stop me. The class was about theories of knowledge. We asked questions like, *"what counts as knowledge? At what point do you actually know something?"* And it was so ironic. I naively assumed that I was going to learn something! I thought, *"I'm really going to know how to know things now. This is going to be great!"* But I left that class in a haze. For months, this marine layer settled over my brain. I thought, *"Do I know anything at all? And if I did, how would I know?"* We spent the semester trying to construct an internally consistent theory of knowledge. And it was really challenging. Bertrand Russell reportedly said that the point of philosophy is, *"to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it."* I think his words apply to other disciplines as well. As you probe into something, you get answers. But those answers generate questions. And the questions get more complex. And at some point, they become baffling. And that's exhausting, isn't it? It can lead us to despair; to

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<sup>3</sup> Story adapted from the July edition of William Lane Craig's newsletter.

throw up our hands and say, “*who can know?*”

The more we learn, the more we learn that there’s more to learn. That’s the first reason knowledge increases sorrow. And here’s the second: knowledge *isn’t* always encouraging. As Kidner says, knowledge doesn’t necessarily resolve our problems. In fact, it often sharpens them. It actually makes them more apparent.<sup>4</sup> As we investigate life, we discover contradictions. We learn that virtue isn’t rewarded; that joy is transient; that evil can quickly destroy what good creates. In other words, knowledge awakens us to tragedy. Solomon seeks meaning in wisdom, and knowledge. But his discoveries grieve him. So he pursues a different path. “*I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility.* <sup>2</sup> *I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?”* <sup>3</sup> *I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.* <sup>4</sup> *I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself;* <sup>5</sup> *I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees;* <sup>6</sup> *I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.* <sup>7</sup> *I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.* <sup>8</sup> *Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men-- many concubines.* <sup>9</sup> *Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.* <sup>10</sup> *And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.* <sup>11</sup> *Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.”*

For a time, Solomon gives up on wisdom. And he runs in the opposite direction. He casts off restraint. He says, “*ignorance is bliss.*” And he lives as a full-tilt heathen. And as king, he has the resources to do this. He pursues physical pleasure. He enjoys the best wine, and the most beautiful women. He also pursues aesthetic pleasure. He plants gardens, and parks, and trees. This passage contains several allusions to Genesis 1. So it appears that Solomon is trying re-create the Garden of Eden. He builds this visual paradise. He hires singers, so he can hear beautiful music. He also increases his possessions. He acquires slaves, and flocks, and herds, and precious metals. He undertakes great building projects. He does what kings do. He tries to secure his legacy. And in a sense, he succeeds. He surpasses everyone who came before him.

And notice, the pursuit is utterly self-focused. Solomon says, “*I built this for myself. I collected this for myself. I did not deny myself.*” Solomon pursues every lofty ambition. He indulges every base desire. But he does so with great intentionality. His “*mind*” guides him. His

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* (TBST: IVP: Downers Grove, 1976); 31.

wisdom is with him. In other words, Solomon is very thoughtful about his thoughtlessness. Remember, he's still on a quest for meaning. And now, he's testing pleasure. He wants to see if it will profit him. But it doesn't. The plan is doomed from the start. Solomon says, "*this is madness!*" Folly and self-indulgence accomplish nothing. And they leave him totally empty.

I have a good friend who came to Christ in college. And prior to meeting Jesus, he had the quintessential college experience. He did what many students only dream of doing. He cast off restraint. He went to the top party school in the nation. He joined one of the craziest fraternities. He had an endless supply of drugs, and alcohol. He had more than enough women. But it wasn't satisfying. It couldn't fill the void. And by God's grace, he reached a crisis point. He was living for pleasure. But he realized that he'd already reached the pinnacle. Life wasn't going to get any better. He'd never be this young again; or this attractive; or have this little responsibility; or be able to drink this much; or smoke this much. And he'd never be around this many attractive women. He'd reached the pinnacle. And it wasn't that great. And to make matters worse, it was all downhill from here. And that realization drove him to despair. And then – *praise God* – it drove him to Jesus.

Not all pleasure is bad. God has created many pleasures that we can rightfully enjoy. But here's what I know about myself. When I lean into pleasure; when I seek it above all else; it's usually a coping mechanism. Solomon ran from the misery of life; from the burden of wisdom and knowledge. So what are you running from? I don't know what you crave. I don't know if it's sex, or food, or alcohol. Maybe it's a medication, or a video game, or a smart-phone. Whatever it is, ask yourself this question; "*when do I turn to that?*" What do think about when you're stressed? Where does your mind instinctively go? When you feel disrespected, or lonely, or bored, where do you turn? Pleasure is like Novocain. It can temporarily numb us to pain. But here's what scares me. You can lean into pleasure. But that addiction never gets more satisfying. And, it never actually makes life easier. Your problems aren't going anywhere. They're waiting for you at the bottom of that high. In fact, the problems get bigger, because you're not dealing with them! And God offers us a better way. He delivers us from trials by bringing us *through* them. He promises to walk with us through hardships. But if you're constantly running – if you're always trying to escape – you preempt that from happening. You can run away. But eventually, you'll have to walk *through*. And that's where we want to help you. That's why we have Celebrate Recovery. That's why we have small groups. You can be vulnerable. You can find a place where it's okay not to be okay. And you can start dealing with what's *actually* going on. Pleasure is a false-savior. It didn't deliver Solomon. It doesn't deliver us. It only enslaves.

**B. Reaction:** Solomon has reached the end of his journey. And he has come away empty-handed. And now, he pauses. And reflects on what he has learned. "*So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done?*"<sup>13</sup> *And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.*"<sup>14</sup> *The*

*wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.* <sup>15</sup> *Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity."* <sup>16</sup> *For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!* <sup>17</sup> *So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.* <sup>18</sup> *Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me.* <sup>19</sup> *And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.* <sup>20</sup> *Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.* <sup>21</sup> *When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.* <sup>22</sup> *For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?* <sup>23</sup> *Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity."*

Solomon reflects on his search. And he considers the paths he has taken. He compares wisdom with folly. And he concludes that wisdom is better. The wise person can see where she's going. She can avoid pitfalls. But the fool is blind. He's led by his appetite. He continually says what he shouldn't say. He does what he shouldn't do. He goes where he shouldn't go. And he suffers as a result. So wisdom is better than folly, because it saves us from pain.

And yet, wisdom only has relative value. The wise person walks straight, whereas the fool falls down. But here's the problem: they both end up walking off a cliff. They meet the same end. They both die. So wisdom doesn't have any absolute value. And that drives Solomon to despair. He says, *"what's the point? Why should I be wise? After all, I'm not going to end up any better off!"*

Solomon seeks some lasting benefit; something that will endure through the ages. But he can't find it. What happens to fools? They die. What happens to wise people? They also die. And both are eventually forgotten. And this causes Solomon to reflect on his legacy. He's still looking for something profitable; something that will last. So he thinks about his labor. His work has consumed him. He has lost sleep over it. He has tried to secure a future for his children. And yet he realizes this too may not endure. His children could squander their inheritance. And they might take his labor for granted. And this compounds his grief.

It's funny. We spend a huge portion of life accumulating money. We exert so much mental energy worrying about our money. Then, we spend a tiny fraction of life actually enjoying money. And finally, we leave our children with that money. But they might totally misuse the money; which was *our* money in the first place! And if they do misuse it, we won't be around to stop them! Now, I think wise people work hard. They labor to leave a legacy. And that's admirable. In fact, I think it's biblical. Money is a wonderful tool. It can solve a lot of

problems. But it's not worthy of our hope. It won't last. It can't satisfy us. And, it won't satisfy our kids. This week, I read a new study on wealth and happiness.<sup>5</sup> And here's what the researchers concluded about wealth: wealthy people are less sad than other people. But they *aren't* more happy! Isn't that hilarious?! I mean, doesn't that sound like it's straight out of Ecclesiastes? The study shows that wealthy people can solve certain problems. Their wealth enables them to avoid various hardships. So they avoid some sadness. But their experiences of happiness are like everyone else's! And I need to remember that. I'm not going to be *happier* when the house is remodeled; or when I go on that vacation; or when I get the new toy. I'm just not. Listen, if Solomon wasn't satisfied with wealth, what hope do I have?

**C. Resignation:** Solomon realizes that death and chance overtake everything. Every road leads to nowhere, because every road ends in death. And thus, Solomon hates life. His reaction is totally negative. And this leads him to resignation. He says, *"There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup> For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? <sup>26</sup> For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind."*

Now, some people believe this is a joyful passage. Solomon is encouraging us to live life to the fullest; to enjoy all of God's good gifts. But I take it a little differently. I don't think Solomon is joyful. He's just realistic. Remember, he didn't find what he was looking for. And he doesn't think anyone else will. In verse 12, he says, *"what could anyone do that I haven't done?"* In other words, *"who could conduct a more exhaustive search than me?"* Solomon despairs of finding meaning. So he says, *"enjoy what seems enjoyable. And just tell yourself you're doing the right thing."* For Solomon, life is bittersweet. Actually, it's sweet-bitter. There are fleeting moments of sweetness; times when the clouds lift. But then, the clouds return. The sweetness becomes bitter. And the bitterness lingers. And Solomon acknowledges that God gives us enjoyment. But he doesn't understand God's ways. He doesn't know why joy is transient. He thinks God is arbitrary. For some reason, God considers certain people good, and gives them an easy life. And for some reason, he considers other people bad, and gives them a difficult life. That's Solomon's perspective. And so he says, *"hey, if you find something good, enjoy it. That's the best you can do."*

So what are we to make of this? Should we take Solomon's advice? Well, yes and no. We should enjoy life. However, we need to keep a few things in mind. Last week, I said that Solomon's perspective isn't incorrect so much as it's incomplete. We can agree with Solomon on a number of points. This world is fractured. Sin has screwed things up. And so Solomon is right; joy *is* fleeting. Bad can quickly overtake good. And meaning is elusive. And if we put our

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/01/08/1948550614568161.abstract>

weight in created things – if we seek *ultimate* meaning from a broken world – we’ll be profoundly disappointed. On the other hand, we have a fuller perspective than Solomon. Christians believe that there is meaning, because Christ is risen. He *will* make all things new. Wrongs will be righted. Voids will be filled. We don’t think death is a dead-end, because we believe that Jesus will kill death. And one day, we will live with God in a new world. So we have a better hope than Solomon. And Jesus is the hope. He has conquered death. So he’s the one road that doesn’t lead to nowhere. We have a fuller perspective, and a better one. And this changes how we enjoy life now. I think there’s a distinctly Christian way to enjoy life.

First we can enjoy God’s gifts. And we can praise him for them. Yes, the world is broken. So yes, our current experience of joy is transient. But we also know that God is good. Unlike Solomon, we don’t have to speculate about that. And we know that because God has given us Jesus. Remember, if you experience joy, it’s from God. Scripture says that God is “*blessed forever*” (Romans 9:5). That means he’s eternally happy. And he wants us to share in that delight. So every delicious meal; every beautiful face we see; every sunset; every meaningful conversation; every soaring melody; every Warriors’ championship run; every good and perfect gift is from our Father in heaven. And as Christians, one of the most God-dishonoring things we can do is refuse to enjoy life. Think about it; how can you honor the Giver if you refuse to enjoy his gifts? So whenever possible, I want to enjoy life, *and* turn my joy into praise. Otherwise, I’ll focus on the negative. And I won’t notice all of God’s blessings.

This week, our students were on Houseboats at Shasta Lake. On Wednesday, I was going to drive up there and hang out with them. So I got in my car. I fought through traffic. I finally got there. But it was raining. And there was lightning and heavy thunder, so all of the houseboats were anchored. It wasn’t safe for them to come get me. So I sat at the edge of the dock. The lightning wouldn’t let up. Eventually it started getting dark. And I was out of time. I couldn’t get on the boat. And so I left. And I’m driving home. And I’m thinking, “*that was meaningless! This feels just like Ecclesiastes!*” And then I drove across this bridge. I’m surrounded by this lake. The sun is setting. The western sky is pink, and orange and purple. And there’s lightning in the distance. Mount Shasta is off to the right. And it’s radiant with the colors of the sunset. And here I am, annoyed and frustrated. And I’m totally oblivious to this theatre of God’s glory that I’m driving through.

Don’t be oblivious. Don’t be like Solomon, and allow the bad things to blind from the good. Soak up the blessings. Take them for what they are. And turn them back into praise. Praise the giver for his gifts. It’ll help you remember that God *is* good.

Praise God for his gifts. Complete your joy by thanking him. And then remember; the best is yet to come. Present joy is just a small foretaste of the world to come. You don’t need to find every answer in this life. When good experiences make you ache; when you long for more; turn that longing heavenward. Remember that you’re not home yet. This is just a taste. You won’t get perfect joy in this life. That’s for another world. But someday, as C.S. Lewis says, we

*will get in.*<sup>6</sup> We'll enter that world where joy is made complete. So put your weight in the right place. Enjoy the good now. But hope for the best later.

Solomon is hopeless. But it's not because he doesn't believe in God. It's because he doesn't *trust* him. He thinks God is arbitrary and capricious. He gives us longings. But he doesn't satisfy them. He gives us moral intuitions. But he doesn't reward virtue. He makes us inquisitive. But he doesn't give us answers. Solomon thinks God has afflicted him. And maybe that's where you're at today. In the midst of such meaninglessness, how can I know that God is good? How can I trust him? It helps to remember Jesus. God came to us. He lived a perfect life for us. And then the only one who got it right was wrongfully accused. And he was crucified. He died the most shameful of deaths. What could be more meaningless than that? What could make less sense? And yet, God used that to rescue you. Jesus lived your life. And then he died your death, so you don't have to. And then he rose, so that death isn't a dead-end. It's now a doorway to life eternal. If God can rectify the world through such a seemingly meaningless event; he can rectify the meaninglessness of your life. And if you trust in him; he will ultimately resolve what now seems unresolvable. Let's pray.

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<sup>6</sup> "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 1949/2001); 43.