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The Debt All People Pay (Ecclesiastes 2:12-26)

Brent Alderman / PO Box 2060, Annapolis, MD 21404 / brent.alderman@capitolcom.org / 240.818.3053

In the second “National Treasure” movie (subtitled “Book of Secrets”) the main character, Ben Gates, is charged with the difficult task of decoding a cipher from 150 years ago. To crack the code, he has to start with a five-letter word. After some questioning, he finds out the crucial clue: the five-letter word is the answer to this riddle - “The debt that all men pay.” Immediately, he goes to work on the cipher, because he knows the word he must start with is “death.”

Solomon told the world the same thing, but in 1000 B.C. He was a national leader who had been given great wisdom by God and near the end of his life, looked back as a keen observer to relate what he had learned. In the passage we study now, Solomon reminds us that death is something common to us all, forcing us to think through the implications that truth has on the way we should think and live.

I. CONSIDER YOUR WISDOM (2:12-17)

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 - 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. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 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. 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. 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! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Solomon’s experience had shown him a stark comparison between the wise and the foolish. Maybe he was more keenly aware of this rift because of his own unsurpassed wisdom. In 1 Kings 3, Solomon asked the Lord for great wisdom, as he was filled with the heavy sense of responsibility leading the nation. The request was granted.

1 Kings 3:12 - ...behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

No one was more qualified than Solomon to contrast the decisions of the wise and the foolish. With the Scriptures guiding us, wisdom can be defined as the skill of living life as it was designed to be lived – knowing and pleasing the Lord. This is developed over a lifetime,

but is a worthy pursuit. It is an outgrowth of the reverential awe that fills one who truly sees God for who he really is.

Proverbs 1:7 - The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Solomon observes that wisdom is better than foolishness, literally showing a person how to make right decisions just as a light helps one navigate their way through a dark room. The fool has no such help, stumbling and bumping, often painfully, through life. But notice Solomon’s conclusion: the wise person and the fool both have the same end in the grave. What good is spending your life making right choices if you’re just going to end up lying in the cemetery beside the fool? Both die and both eventually are forgotten. This leaves Solomon with a feeling of despair and hopelessness.

II. CONSIDER YOUR WORK (2:18-23)

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 - I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Earlier in the book, we saw Solomon’s great accomplishments. He maintained peace with other nations, built lavish palaces as well as the first Temple and led his people with wisdom and equity. It was a life full of hard work. Now in his later years, he can see that all of that effort cannot follow him. He has to leave it all behind when he dies. Others who didn’t work for it will enjoy his wealth. They may be wise or foolish, but he will have control at that point. Again, he calls this vanity or meaningless.

Even while you are alive and enjoying the things you accumulate, they are still a pain. The more things you have, the more things you have to take care of. Solomon says that as hard as you work during the day, at night you will lie there and worry. You aren’t going to lie down to sleep and think, “Happy am I. Behold my car. Behold my house. Behold my trophy wife.” Instead, you twist and flap in the

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stress and trouble that come with your accumulated glories.¹

The tragedy of many people's motivation in life is that they work for themselves and their own comfort. Some work with others in mind (family, employees, constituents), which is more noble, but the end result is still the same. The adage that we can't take it with us is true.

III. CONSIDER YOUR WORLDVIEW (2:24-26)

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 - There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

In verse 24 the words rendered "better" and "than" aren't in the Hebrew text and can give a slightly misleading idea to the meaning. It is more accurate, and fits with Solomon's thought process, to say "There is nothing for a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." In other words, man can do nothing in himself to fully enjoy his experience on earth. There is nothing for us here that should give us ultimate encouragement and fulfillment. No one knew that better than Solomon.

In his book, *The Rockefeller Billions*, Jules Abels says that John D. Rockefeller had an income of approximately a million dollars a week toward the end of his life. Yet his doctors allowed him to eat only a bare minimum. One of his biographers said he lived on a diet a pauper would have hated. "Now, less than 100 pounds in weight, he sampled everything (at breakfast): a drop of coffee, a spoonful of cereal, a forkful of egg, and a bit of a chop the size of a pea." Rockefeller was the richest man in the world, but he didn't have the ability to even enjoy his food.²

Solomon uses a device here that has already pulled us in. He has spent several paragraphs recounting the pointlessness of life on earth. Wisdom won't give satisfaction, because both the wise and foolish eventually die. Work accomplishments won't bring fulfillment since all we earn will go others after we're gone. We won't even be remembered a few years after we pass. The despondency is felt in every line. But like a long-sought oasis, the solution for finding enjoyment in our earthly lives is revealed at the end of the passage.

After saying that there is nothing inherent in man to find enjoyment in his experience, Solomon makes it abundantly clear that enjoyment can be found. In fact, enjoyment is something we are made to seek and experience. The key question here is, "...apart from him (God) who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

Do you want joy, fulfillment and satisfaction? Of course. We all do. The inspired pen of Solomon points us to the source: God himself. For the one who responds to him and what he has revealed, who follows and obeys him, joy can be found.

Hebrews 11:6 - And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Faith is the response, pleasing God is the goal and the reward is true, deep, lasting joy. We cannot substitute another way. Many have tried pursuing joy in all the world offers – money, sex, power, fame, homes, leisure, work – and have always failed. The solution found in Ecclesiastes to finding joy requires faith, submission and obedience.

Every person who ever lived has had an innate desire to experience joy. Many have sought it apart from God, which Solomon calls chasing after the wind. Others have bowed their knee to the God of Heaven through Jesus, the only way to God (John 14:6). Pleasing him and not ourselves is the key to joy. Finding out what pleases him and living life that way will take a lifelong journey of many ups and downs, but it is the only way.

What's your decision? God is not a killjoy. He is the creator of joy and wants you to know the kind of life that brings that joy. The alternative is a forfeiting of life as it was originally designed.

Luke 9:23-25 - And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?"

¹ Nelson, Tommy. *A Life Well Lived* (B & H Publishing: Nashville, TN, 2005), p. 36.

² Swindoll, Chuck. *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Word Books: Waco, TX, 1985), p. 62.