

Death: The Common Lot of All

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17; 1 Corinthians 4:7

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There are at least two experiences that I can say with certainty are common to everyone within the sound of my voice today: birth and death. We who are gathered here today have all made it past the common experience of birth, but we each one yet face the common experience of death. None of us will be able to refuse that appointment. We cannot pass that appointment on to a co-worker. It is an appointment we (each one) must take, and one for which we will not be late.

Death is the great leveler. There may be many differences between each of us today. Some will be older, others younger. Some will be wealthier, others poorer. Some will be more educated, others less educated. Some will be male, others will be female. Some will be from one nationality, others from another nationality. The differences between us are many. But there is one experience that we will all share together. We will all cease to breathe. The hearts of all of us will stop pumping blood. Our bodies will (each one) be laid in a grave, awaiting the general resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. All of these things will certainly happen.

Although death is a common experience to us all, the way in which we die is not common. Some will die without hope of everlasting life, while others will die with hope of everlasting life.

From our text today, Solomon continues his search for an enduring joy, but comes face to face with death as that which levels the playing field for all men. The main points from our text are these: (1) The Way in Which Wisdom and Folly Are Different (Ecclesiastes 2:12-14a); and (2) The Way in Which Wisdom and Folly Are the Same (Ecclesiastes 2:14b-17).

I. The Way in Which Wisdom and Folly Are Different (Ecclesiastes 2:12-14a).

A. As Solomon continues in his thorough investigation to find an abiding joy that continues throughout the many changes that God brings into the lives of men, he returns to a consideration of wisdom and folly which he had raised in Ecclesiastes 1: 16-18. There Solomon states for the record that in his pursuit of contentment apart from Christ, he carefully considered both **WORLDLY WISDOM** (comprehending knowledge of the world around him and moral virtue) and **SENSUAL FOLLY** (comprehending the pleasures of this life which were not necessarily sinful in and of themselves as we have seen in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11). Solomon concludes that his search for joy in worldly wisdom only brought him greater misery. For the more a person knows about life, the more he realizes he really doesn't know (if he is honest). More worldly knowledge and wisdom only increase the questions that inevitably go unanswered. Frustration and inner conflict weigh us down, while joy and contentment take wings and fly away. The wisdom which Solomon has in view here cannot be a heavenly wisdom or a Divine wisdom, for the more we have of heavenly wisdom, the more our peace and contentment in the Lord grows. However, the wisdom, which Solomon addresses in Ecclesiastes 1:17-18, only increases vexation of spirit (along with grief and sorrow).

B. Now Solomon takes up the theme of wisdom and folly once again, but from a different perspective than before. This time he investigates whether there is essentially any difference between **WORLDLY WISDOM** and **SENSUAL PLEASURE**. Solomon declares, "And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly" (Ecclesiastes 2:12). He decides to take another look at wisdom, madness, and folly. Solomon detects a real difference between **WORLDLY WISDOM** and **SENSUAL FOLLY** (which he will make

known in the next couple verses).

C. But what about the person who follows Solomon in years or ages to come? Will that person be able to investigate more thoroughly the matters of **WORLDLY WISDOM** or **SENSUAL PLEASURES** than did Solomon? Solomon responds, “NO!” For he asks, “What can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath already been done” (Ecclesiastes 1:12). In other words, the man coming after King Solomon can only do (at best) what Solomon has already done by way of investigation (and that’s assuming he has the same riches and wealth that Solomon had). Although a man who takes up this same pursuit to find true joy can do no more than Solomon, he will likely do far less than Solomon did, due to the lack of resources he has when compared to the abundance of resources that Solomon had.

1. Herein is revealed the hardness of our hearts. He who had everything his eye beheld could not find a lasting happiness in either **WORLDLY WISDOM** or **SENSUAL PLEASURES** of every kind, and yet we deceive and delude ourselves into thinking we can find what Solomon with all of his wealth was unable to find. If this blindness does not reveal to us how our own heart “is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”, then I don’t know what will. We might as well believe we can swim without rest from Cape Cod to the shores of England. Now if the greatest swimmer alive said to you, “I tried it, and it cannot be done.” Wouldn’t you be out of your mind to think you were able to do it? Solomon may not be the greatest swimmer that ever lived, but he was one of the wealthiest and **THE** wisest man that ever lived (except from Christ). And he has said (in effect), “It cannot be done. You cannot find true joy and happiness in the knowledge or pleasures of this world. A full satisfaction can only be found in enjoying Jesus Christ.”

2. Let us also observe that our gracious God, who speaks through the repentant Preacher in Ecclesiastes (Solomon), is trying to save you and me much heartache and time, so that we do not have to experience the misery Solomon experienced. What a kind and gracious Savior we have. We may sinfully complain about the severe trials the Lord brings into our lives for our good in order to grow us in our faith, but here the Lord is actually seeking to save us from many grievous trials by means of the experience and testimony of Solomon. And what do we do? We turn a deaf ear. We complain about the trials he sends our way because we don’t like them. But God sent us the trials because we would not listen to his tender pleading through the testimony of Solomon and others in His Word. Dear ones, if we read God’s Word with insight and wisdom, we will hear God pleading with us at every turn to take heed, be warned, and turn from our own evil ways in order that we might not have to learn those lessons the hard way (1 Corinthians 10:11). At times the Lord by His Word and Spirit even lovingly shouts at us, just as we parents would do with our own child who was heading into the path of an oncoming car. Oh, the amazing kindness and goodness of our Father!

D. Solomon now evaluates **WORLDLY WISDOM** in relation to **SENSUAL PLEASURES** (Ecclesiastes 2:13-14a). He concludes that **WORLDLY WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE** far exceed in benefit **SENSUAL PLEASURES**. What Solomon is saying is that the wisdom and knowledge of this world is superior to the pleasures of this world, because worldly wisdom (no matter how far it falls short of heavenly wisdom) does give to man (to some degree) eyes to know where to walk in this world, whereas worldly pleasure (though not sinful in itself) has no eyes to know where to walk—it only has taste buds, noses, ears, hands, and feet (read Ecclesiastes 2:14a). So Solomon says that from his own investigation of worldly wisdom and worldly folly that worldly wisdom is superior to worldly folly.

1. Now Solomon is not saying that the pleasures of this life are evil or sinful in themselves. For as we have seen previously in Chapter 2, the following pleasures were not sinful in themselves: laughter, wine and food, houses, vineyards, gardens and parks, servants, cattle, gold, or music. So Solomon is not condemning these earthly pleasures as sinful in themselves any more than he is condemning a worldly wisdom and knowledge as sinful in themselves. For, dear one, it is good to have a knowledge of this world (whether one is a Christian or a non-Christian). It is good to have what we might call “common sense” (whether one is a

Christian or a non-Christian). It is good to live a virtuous life (even though we know from God's Word that a virtuous life on the part of man cannot merit him the forgiveness of his sin or everlasting life). Consider the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (16:7):

Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God.

2. Dear ones, it is certainly better to have been raised by unbelieving parents who loved you, had great common sense, and lived virtuous lives than by those who hated you, did not act as though they knew right from wrong, and lived wretched, immoral lives in front of you. If you have an unbelieving boss, would you rather have one that swears and curses God throughout the day or one that does not? If you have a heart attack and are rushed to emergency, would you rather have a cardiologist that knows a great deal about the heart and cares for his patients (even if he is not a Christian), or one that doesn't?

3. Let us realize that when God does give worldly knowledge and wisdom to a doctor, or to an auto mechanic, or to a computer technician, or to a father or mother, that although we benefit from that worldly knowledge and wisdom, that worldly knowledge and wisdom actually make them more accountable to the God that has given it to them. For they have received of God's common goodness to man and have not acknowledged Him to be the Giver. How often does the very worldly knowledge that we have, make us more arrogant and proud, or even the biblical knowledge that we have, give us a big head (1 Corinthians 8:1b,2)? I would rather see in a Christian less knowledge of the truth and yet a humility in practicing it, than a greater knowledge of the truth and yet a pride in merely preaching it. Obviously, the goal is to grow in both knowledge and in humility. How often does a skill that we do well puff us up? Dear ones, whatever the gift God has given you, whether administration skills, organization skills, decorating skills, cooking skills, serving skills, leading skills, athletic skills, musical skills, writing skills, etc., do not let that gift lead you away from the Lord by way of a proud self-sufficiency, but rather let it lead you to the Lord by way of a humble dependence upon Him for every good and perfect gift (1 Corinthians 4:7). On the other hand, we must be careful not to go to the other extreme, where we ignore, neglect, or criticize the skills and abilities God has given us, for that as well takes the spotlight off of God (who gave us those skills) and rather shines the spotlight upon ourselves. Dear Ones, Solomon was carried away by his own knowledge and wisdom. The same can and will happen to us as well, if we do not consciously pursue a loving communion with Christ in prayer, reading of His Word, meditation upon His Word, and renewed obedience to His commandments.

II. The Way in Which Wisdom and Folly Are the Same (Ecclesiastes 2:14b-17).

A. In spite of the difference between worldly wisdom and worldly pleasure (wherein Solomon has just mentioned the superiority of this wisdom over pleasure), there is something they both share in common: death—death will inevitably come to the man who follows the path of worldly wisdom, just as it will come to the man who follows the path of worldly pleasure. Neither one is better off than the other in avoiding the grave. No matter how much knowledge one may have of the world and universe around us, no matter how much wisdom one may have of how to live a moral life and make good practical decisions, no matter how much pleasure one may have in enjoying the many delights this world has to offer, they all will come to the same common experience: death (Ecclesiastes 2:14b). Solomon saw as he reflected upon this undeniable and universal truth, that all his knowledge and wisdom of the world could not save him from the same lot that

would befall one who gave himself up to the folly and pleasures of the world. How was he then, ultimately better off with all of that knowledge and wisdom than the fool, who only sought to satisfy his senses rather than his mind? He concluded that he wasn't better off than the fool. He was simply a wise fool ("sophomore" means "a wise fool", that is one who thinks very highly of what he knows, but who has only scratched the surface and is too foolish to realize it). Solomon (as it were) throws up his hands in desperation and cries out, "This also is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 2:15).

1. Dear ones, the wisdom and knowledge of this world is a vapor that is here today and gone tomorrow, just as are the pleasures of this life. The wisdom and knowledge of this world are a vapor that cannot satisfy the inner thirst of man any more than the pleasures of this world. This is the utter futility of man that seeks to live life apart from union and communion with Jesus Christ. No matter how rich, no matter how talented, no matter how knowledgeable, no matter how successful, it all means nothing when he is on his death bed and stares into the grave. For, dear ones, he must leave behind all that which was his life and his reason for living. He cannot take all that he worked so hard to accomplish and to enjoy in this life with him. With Solomon, we all cry out, "That is vanity, emptiness, and futility." How much more this utter vanity will weigh upon the souls of those who at their death have known the truth of Jesus Christ (have grown up in a Christian home, worshipped with their family at home and with the Church). Friends, I don't want to be at death's door, and finally have to acknowledge the vanity of all that I have done in life. I want to acknowledge right now the vanity of all the knowledge of this world and all of the pleasures of this world in giving everlasting joy and everlasting life.

2. Friends, it is easy to look at the sad experiences of others who have learned lessons the hard way and to say, "I will gain their knowledge and enjoy their pleasures without falling into their sad experiences." But there is an experience that you will share with all who have preceded you: you will die. Solomon certainly knew he was going to die sooner or later. But the reality of death really hit him in a way he had not previously known when he says in Ecclesiastes 2:15, "Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth to me" (or literally from the Hebrew text, "As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth to me, EVEN TO ME"). Until the reality of death knocks some sense into you, you will not be driven to seek a joy that transcends death, a forgiveness that endures beyond death, a peace that death cannot quench, or a life that death cannot destroy. Being hit with the reality of our death and the death of our loved ones who sit beside us today is not the END of joy, peace, love, contentment, or satisfaction. It is actually the BEGINNING. For when death becomes a reality to us, we look to Christ who conquered death for all those who will receive and rest in Him alone for everlasting forgiveness, everlasting righteousness, everlasting joy, and everlasting life. In the face of our own death and the death of our loved ones, life in this world takes on a different face. We learn to take delight in even the little things in life. We learn to love in a way we had not loved before (even to love those who are unlovely). We learn to be content in all circumstances of life if we know we cannot take these things with us after death. Death need not hold that fear over the head of the Christian. For Christ has removed the "sting" of death by his own death and resurrection. The sting of death is the curse of the Law. That curse (or condemnation of the Law) has been removed from everyone who trusts no longer in his own goodness, but in the goodness of Christ alone—who trusts no longer in his own righteousness, but in the righteousness of Christ alone—who trusts no longer in his own worthiness, but in the worthiness of Christ alone—who trust no longer in his own sufficiency, but in the sufficiency of Christ alone.

B. Not only is death the common experience of both the wise man of this world and the foolish man of this world (Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15), but there is no more remembrance of the wise man of this world than there is of the foolish man of this world (Ecclesiastes 1:16). In fact, it may be argued that the rich and the famous of this age (the movie stars, the music stars, the sports stars, etc.) are remembered more often and longer than the wise men of this world, who gain knowledge and live a moral life. So what advantage does the wise man of this world have over the foolish man of this world in the legacy of his name? None! The world

loves its foolish man as much (if not more) as it loves its wise man. But, dear ones, there is a remembrance of the righteous. Even if the world forgets the great Christians of the past, even if the next generation forgets the least Christian of this generation, the Lord will not forget them. God holds them in perpetual remembrance. The memory of the wicked shall perish (Psalm 34:16). However, the memory of the righteous will endure forever (Psalm 112:6; Hebrews 6:10). Dear ones, if it is unrighteous for God to forget our work and labor of love, what if we should forget the Lord's work and His labor of love for us? Is that not unrighteous for us to do?

C. Furthermore, how does the wise man of this world die any differently than the foolish man of this world? Solomon says, "And how dieth the wise man? as the fool" (Ecclesiastes 2:16). Does the wise man of this world die just as the fool dies? Do the wise men of this world die of cancer like the foolish men of this world? Do the wise men of this world die in car accidents like the foolish men of this world? Do the wise men of this world face the same grave as the foolish men of this world? Absolutely! Solomon is not saying that since there is no difference between the wise man of this world and the foolish man of this world that you might as well be foolish and forget all about knowledge and wisdom and rather indulge yourself in all of the pleasures of this world in order to find an everlasting joy and contentment. What he is saying is for the benefit of all (who like himself) placed so much stock in gaining the knowledge and wisdom of this world: "Oh, wise man of this world, you are no better off than the fool you condemn when it comes to finding everlasting joy and happiness, for you (like the fool) will rot in the grave. You (like the fool) will be forgotten. Don't delude yourself into thinking your approach to finding an enduring peace and contentment is better than the fool's approach, for then you will have become like the fool you condemn."

D. Finally, we come to Solomon's conclusion in Ecclesiastes 2:17: Read it.

1. He hated his life because all his work to find an everlasting joy in the things of this world was fruitless.

2. He said it was all vanity (a mere vapor), whether it was the wisdom and knowledge of this world or the sensual pleasures of this world. For both of these would perish in the grave.

3. He said it was a vexation (a great tragedy) that befell the spirit of man. For, after all of the work that is invested by a man in searching for an enduring joy that will satisfy, it is all for nothing.

E. That may sound very hopeless, and it is. It may sound very negative, and it is. It may sound very pessimistic, and it is. Solomon wants you to see so clearly that if you are traveling this road in order to find meaning and purpose to life, joy and contentment in life, you will never find it in either pursuing knowledge or in pursuing pleasure. God wants you to see the futility of this search so that you will look to Christ, who alone can bring meaning and purpose, joy and contentment that endures forever. Dear ones, your search will continue and will never end, until you face the grave, if you look for an everlasting joy in knowledge or in pleasure. But your search will finally come to an end when you find everything you need in this life and everything you need in the life to come in Jesus Christ. The search for the Christian is over. He/She need only come daily to drink from Jesus, the water of life, again and again and again and take in the treasures of faith, repentance, forgiveness, life, holiness, courage, perseverance, and his/her daily bread. Dear one, come to Christ by faith alone and end your search today.

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