

## “Trivial Pursuit”

Ecclesiastes 1:2-2:26

Word origins have often amazed me. When you discover the origin of a word and the way that it has been used throughout history, there is just something about it that helps add new meaning. Take the word ‘trivial’ to use as an example.

The words trivial and trivium can be traced back to a Latin noun meaning “a place where three roads meet.” The adjective form of trivium was used to mean “common, ordinary.” This sense probably developed from the fact that road junctions functioned as meeting places for people to exchange in casual conversation. In the 16th century, as an adjective, ‘trivial’ came to be used in English with the same meaning. In time, it also came to mean “of little worth or importance.” This is the main meaning of the word today.

By this definition, the expression ‘trivial pursuit’ obviously refers to more than a board game. It is a way of referring to those matters in life which are supposedly inconsequential, a waste of time and energy.

At first glance, it may seem that the author of Ecclesiastes is writing to us about trivial pursuits in life. But as we have already seen, he is writing from an ‘under the sun’ kind of perspective which he refers to as being ‘vanity.’

Some read the book and come to the conclusion that it is about the meaninglessness of life. And while it may appear this way strictly on the surface, Ecclesiastes is really about the meaninglessness of life **apart from God**.

The message of Ecclesiastes is not one that says nothing in life really matters. Instead, the message is everything in life matters when seen in light of who God

is. That is why Christianity says that the only ‘trivial pursuits’ in life are the ones done apart from God, outside of the true knowledge of God, those without Christ at the center. And yet no matter where a person looks, no matter what direction he or she turns, there is no lasting satisfaction to be found—at least not in the temporal things of life. The reason is that we've been made for eternity.

That is something that King Solomon knew a lot about. He had arrived at the pinnacle of life. For more than 40 years, Solomon had lived on the top of the mountain of success. His kingdom was a sight to behold. He had wealth, luxury, and tons of wisdom to go with it. And despite being the wisest man who had ever lived, he allowed his stuff to get between him and God. Solomon had made it to the top, and he tells us in Ecclesiastes that it was a desolate place apart from God.

Solomon’s name is not mentioned anywhere in the book. Yet from several statements that are made throughout, a strong argument can be made that he was indeed its author. In verse 1, he is simply identified as “the Preacher, the son of Solomon, king in Jerusalem.”

**“Preacher”** — *word is ‘Qoheleth’; means one who gathers or convenes an assembly*

The Hebrew word refers to the gathering of a community of people for worship and instruction. The idea is that of a preacher standing before a gathered congregation.

The title ‘Ecclesiastes’ comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word. It is a form of the word ‘ekklesia’ which is the common word used throughout the New Testament for ‘church.’ So ‘Ecclesiastes’ means one who speaks in the

ekklesia. Thus, the author is the Preacher. He is one who stands to impart his wisdom and instruction to the gathered assembly of God's people.

Within this text, Solomon—the Preacher of Ecclesiastes—gets very specific about his quest to find satisfaction under the sun. He tells us that he experimented with everything under the sun, and found it to be nothing more than a trivial pursuit. I want us to look at this section in chapters 1-2 under three different headings: investigation, frustration, and observation.

### **1. Solomon's INVESTIGATION of life (1:12-15)**

*“12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”*

#### His credentials

Solomon's position in life gave him great opportunity. As king, he was the highest authority in the land. Add to that the fact that he was the most prosperous king in Israel's history. Unlike David who was a man of war, Solomon was king in a time of extended peace. In wartime, a man tends to remain more focused and frugal. In peacetime, a man has more time on his hands.

For some four decades during Solomon's reign, there were no armies battering at the walls of Jerusalem. There were no enemies on the horizon. For nearly half a century, there was no need to spend money on building up the military or the national defense budget.

The nations came from the corners of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon and to behold the splendor of his kingdom. For instance:

**1 Kings 10:1 — “Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions.”**

The fact that Solomon speaks with perfect tense language in verse 12 tells us that he is writing near the end of his reign, looking back on his life. And so he is speaking from the vantage point of both age and experience. He asserts his credentials as a means of showing us that he is more than qualified to argue his case.

#### His intention

Notice he says that he gave his heart to ‘seek’ and to ‘search out’ by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

**“Seek”** — *to investigate the roots of a matter; extensive*

It is what a dog does when it catches a whiff of something that get its attention. Have you ever watched a hound dog hot on the trail of something that it is tracking? That is the idea here behind this word. (illus. of a PhD dissertation)

**“Search Out”** — *to examine from all sides; intensive*

He’s describing the extent of his experimentation in life. He carefully investigated all the pleasures of life. He took all of the wisdom that he had been given, and he says that he put it to use for the purpose of finding some satisfaction in life under the sun.

#### His thesis

After he did all of the careful investigative work, weighing all of his experiences, what was his analysis? Look at what he says at the end of verse 13—“It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”

**“Children of Man”** —*reference to the nature of humanity*

It is a reference to the fall of man. The Preacher is calling attention to the fact that it is difficult for humanity to find the answers to life’s mysteries because there’s something that is wrong on the inside of man. As those who are made in the image of God, we can’t help but ask ultimate questions in life, trying to understand the meaning of life. Left alone, it is a burdensome task for a person who has a deep desire to understand life but is only baffled by what he finds.

Stephen Hawking was one of most brilliant minds of the last century. As an astrophysicist, he studied the stars and the mysteries of the universe. But he began from a point of view that automatically ruled out the existence of God. What did he conclude?

**Stephen Hawking** — *“We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the universe.”*

Think of the irony of that statement! Our life is of no major consequence, we are the product of chance, but we desire to understand the universe. There is something within us that tries to reach for the stars. It is evidence of design!

Solomon here describes the unhappiness or the emptiness of his own efforts of trying to understand the universe. The longer that he looked for answers and the harder that he tried to find satisfaction, the more empty he became.

His thesis and summary of all his findings that he will go on to write about can be summed up in verse 14—“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”

**“Vanity”** — *word is ‘hevel’ and means vapor or breath*

The word ‘behold’ makes the Preacher’s statement here emphatic and calls for our attention. He is saying, “I have looked at life from every angle under the sun and have found it to be vapor, chasing after the wind!” And just when you think that you’ve found something that will satisfy the longing of your heart, it slips through your fingers. Or just when you’ve found security in life, something goes wrong, something unforeseen happens that can’t be explained.

That’s why he says in verse 15, “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” In other words, there is always something in life that we wish we could bend back into shape, but we can’t. No matter how hard we try, our circumstances cannot seem to be corrected. Some things just don’t add up. Under the sun, life is what it is and there is nothing we can do to fix it. We can tell that something is broken, but on our own we cannot figure out what it is. We can treat the symptoms of the brokenness, but we can’t cure the disease itself. Solomon’s investigation soon led to...

## **2. Solomon’s FRUSTRATION with life (1:16-2:11)**

The Preacher is going to take the next several verses and tell us just where exactly he sought to find satisfaction under the sun. And no matter which direction he turned, no matter what pursuit he went after under the sun, it left him frustrated. It was all a trivial pursuit under the sun. To begin with, he says that he discovered:

## No satisfaction in wisdom (1:16-18)

*“16 I said in my heart, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’ 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”*

When Solomon looked back on his life and said in his heart, “I have acquired great wisdom,” it most certainly was no understatement. No person alive had ever gained more knowledge and wisdom than he had. (see 1 Kings 3)

He was the wisest man who ever lived, and his quest for knowledge took him as far as he could go. What was the conclusion he came to? He said it was chasing the wind. The more he learned, the more empty he felt. All that his knowledge did was to bring him but one step closer to his ignorance.

Education is an idol in our society. What would lead a well respected celebrity to bribe college officials to fudge on the scores of their children so they could get accepted? It is the idea that their education is ultimate.

We have more men of degree in our day than ever before, and yet we’re still going around in circles. Obviously, the Preacher is not saying that education is not important. He is saying that it is not ultimate. There’s a big difference. Our hearts can latch on to things such as knowledge and learning, degree and education, and make these things the ultimate things in life. When that happens, they turn on us and take life from us rather than give life and satisfaction. The one who becomes obsessed with his or her grades to such a degree that it becomes their identity makes an idol out of it, giving it the place that should be reserved only for God. It becomes a trivial pursuit.

## No satisfaction in wine (2:1-3)

*“1 I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’ 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.”*

When knowledge and wisdom could not satisfy the longing of his heart, Solomon turned to laughter and alcohol and the pursuit of pleasure. When intellectualism could not satisfy, he turned to hedonism and the party life.

Sensual pleasure seemed to promise satisfaction. And so Solomon pursued it with reckless abandon. He went after pleasure and enjoyment like none before him. One writer described his pad in Jerusalem as a tenth century Caesar’s Palace. Every night was a different entertainer. He had a palace full of servants who answered his every beck and call. He had a harem like no other. When the amusement didn’t satisfy, he turned to the alcohol.

**David Jeremiah** — *“The bottomless budgets of the liquor industry make drinking seem very attractive today. A wine glass or beer bottle become a ticket to social acceptance for our young people, and soon they feel naked without it. Campus parties and social life revolve completely around drinking and intoxication, as if these were the most glorious of pursuits, the focus of life itself. Meanwhile, the mounting tragedies of drunk driving and dissipated lives are ignored, because who can shout over the message of movies, songs, and TV commercials that glorify the emptiness.”*

Solomon lived the lifestyle of a playboy. It consisted of wine, women, and wild living. Down in verse 10, he says, “And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep

from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure.” And yet the party life wasn’t all that it was cracked up to be.

**Message**—*“I said to myself, ‘Let’s go for it—experiment with pleasure, have a good time!’ But there was nothing to it, nothing but smoke. What do I think of the fun-filled life? Insane! Inane! My verdict on the pursuit of happiness? Who needs it? With the help of a bottle of wine and all the wisdom I could muster, I tried my level best to penetrate the absurdity of life. I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do during the years we spend on this earth.”*

#### No satisfaction in work (2:4-7)

*“4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.”*

When intellectualism left him unsatisfied, and hedonism left him unsatisfied, Solomon turned to professionalism. He gave himself wholeheartedly to his work, to various building and land development projects. Physical pleasure was but for a moment, but buildings represented legacy. After he was gone, the buildings would remain as solid monuments, for future generations would say, “How great was Solomon, and here are all of his great works!”

Solomon didn't just do a great work; he made great works. He didn't just built a house; he built houses. He didn't just plant a vineyard; he planted vineyards. He didn't just make a garden; he made gardens. It is all plural language.

We read in 1 Kings 6:38 that it took Solomon seven years to build the temple. And yet the very next verse in 1 Kings 7:1 says that Solomon was building his

own house for some 14 years! Verse after verse says something like this, “Solomon built...Solomon made...Solomon did.”

Notice the language of ‘self’ in his words here. In fact, the words ‘I, me, my, myself’ are used some 73 times! He was determined to build for himself through his own personal effort a little bit of heaven on earth. It was his attempt to regain Paradise that had been lost. The description of all that he built sounds somewhat like a second Garden of Eden—especially the gardens and trees of verse 5. It is his own little world within the world.

We often make our work something ultimate, don’t we? All too often, the first question we ask when we are trying to get to know a person is this one—“What do you do for a living?” A better question is, “What are you living for?”

If we try to find significance in our work, if we make our careers and accomplishments ultimate things, then it will only end in disappointment.

#### No satisfaction in wealth (2:8-11)

*“8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”*

When Solomon couldn't find satisfaction in intellectualism, he turned to hedonism. When he couldn't find satisfaction in hedonism, he turned to

professionalism. And when he couldn't find satisfaction in professionalism, the next thing that Solomon turned to was materialism.

He amassed silver and gold, trinkets and treasures. He had singers and slaves, wives and concubines. It was a treasury of wealth unlike any other. From what we're told in the Bible, the immensity of Solomon's wealth is beyond description. (see 1 Kings 4:20-28; 10:14-29)

Some have estimated that in current values, his annual income in gold alone would be more than \$305 million, not counting what came to him as tribute from other nations. Add to that the silver and the hard assets, Solomon had more wealth than Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates combined.

Solomon's temple left those who saw it breathless. Gold was found everywhere in its design. Solomon's palace was made of ivory and every precious stone imaginable. And so it is easy to see why the Bible says that the glory of Solomon's kingdom surpassed all the kings of the earth.

Solomon's investigation led him to experiment with idolatry and living for self-gratification, and he only ended up living in frustration. He discovered that all of his pursuits outside of God were meaningless and empty.

His investigation led to frustration, and the notice...

### **3. Solomon's OBSERVATION in life (2:12-26)**

What does he say about it all? Look at verse 11:

*"Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."*

He sums it all up by saying:

- No satisfaction in wisdom! couldn't think my way to life
- No satisfaction in wine! couldn't feel my way to life
- No satisfaction in work! couldn't achieve my way to life
- No satisfaction in wealth! couldn't earn my way to life

He comes full circle and says the same thing in 2:11 that he said in 1:14. He says, "I have looked at life from every angle under the sun and have found it to be vapor, chasing after the wind!" And just when you think that you've found something that will satisfy the longing of your heart, it slips through your fingers. Or just when you've found security in life, something goes wrong, something unforeseen happens that can't be explained. And so he says:

I considered...

I hated...

I saw...

**2:24-25—“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?”**

Philip Graham Ryken has said that what Solomon writes in verses 24-25 is really “an oasis of optimism in a wilderness of despair.” It was only as he hit bottom that he saw what really mattered and found what truly satisfied.

Apart from the saving knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ, life cannot be properly understood.

There are only three possible outcomes. The first is seeing life as we ought to through the eyes of faith in Jesus Christ and possessing a biblical worldview. The second option is viewing life through the lens of false religion or ideologies. The third is living only for what can be seen and felt, living only for the here and now—“Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die!”

It is a given that a person will live their life for something that they see as being ultimate. There are no other options other than the three I have pointed out. You live for Christ, you live for a false religion, or you live for yourself. To be human is to be on a quest. You can't not bet your life on something. You can't not be headed somewhere. You can't not be a worshiper. You will live your life in some direction, toward the thing that you see as being ultimate.

Your heart is a compass, but the problem is that it is broken and not calibrated to true north. Sin's depravity has left the spiritual part of man—our capacity to know God—dead and empty, and we try to fill it with anything and everything other than God. Whether it be intellectualism, hedonism, professionalism, materialism, or any other “-ism.”

A compass that is not properly calibrated, or a map that is not properly oriented can have disastrous repercussions!

Hampton Sides, in his book “In the Kingdom of Ice,” tells the story of the failed 19th century polar expedition of the USS Jeanette, which was headed up by Captain George De Long. On July 8, 1879, Captain De Long and a team of 32 men sailed from San Francisco on the Jeanette with the aspiration that the United States would be the first nation to reach the North Pole. The entire expedition rested on a theory of the North Pole that had been laid out in the maps of Dr. Heinrich Petermann. These maps suggested that there was a

‘thermometric gateway’ through the ice that opened onto a vast polar sea on the top of the world, essentially a fair-weather passage beyond all the ice. De Long’s entire expedition was staked on these maps. But it turned out he was heading into a world that didn’t exist. The maps were not accurate.

As perilous ice quickly surrounded the ship, the team had to shed all of their previously held ideas and replace them with a reckoning of the way the Arctic truly is.

The world around us constantly sells us faulty maps of the good life. And all too often we stake the expedition of our lives upon these faulty maps. Tragically, it is not until we’re shipwrecked that we realize we trusted in the wrong map.

The problem of brokenness that we observe on the outside has been brought on by the problem of man’s brokenness on the inside. In his heart, he has gone astray. Sin is what separates him from a holy God.

**Romans 8:20—“For creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it...”**

What is broken cannot be made straight, what is lacking cannot be counted because creation has been cursed as a result of Adam’s sin. There seems to be no answers under the sun. Which is why we must trust in the One who came from beyond the sun, who lived and walked among us, who took on all of our brokenness and sin, who died on the cross for our sin, who rose again from the grave and ascended back beyond the sun at the right of God the Father.

In the end, Solomon’s dissatisfaction with life served to point him back to God. All the pleasure and trivial pursuit under the sun couldn’t satisfy his soul, which is why he says in Ecclesiastes that we need to look beyond this world to the God of

heaven. Unsatisfied longings give us a spiritual clue that we've been made for something more than this world can offer. If we were able to find lasting happiness in earthly pleasure, then we would never recognize our need for God. We would never be able to see our sin in its true light nor understand our need for repentance. And we would never look to Christ as our one and only hope.

Solomon tried to find satisfaction in wisdom. Yet the Bible says in Colossians 2:3 that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Solomon tried to find satisfaction in pleasure. Yet the Bible says in Psalm 16:11, “You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Solomon tried to find satisfaction in his work. Yet the Bible says in Ephesians 2:8-10, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Solomon tried to find satisfaction in wealth and riches. Yet the Bible says in Ephesians 3:8 that we have been given the “unsearchable riches of Christ.”

**Matthew 6:21 — “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

This is why Jesus says that if anyone wants to follow Him as His disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. Those who deny themselves are those who've found a much greater treasure in Christ!

Have you found your ultimate treasure in Him?