**BCM Bible Study: March 24/25, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-12-2:26**

Introduction

Follow up on where you left off last week. Were you able to spend time alone with God? If so, how was it? If not, what do you think makes it difficult for you to do so?

To begin, give a quick review of last week. Briefly discuss the idea of *hevel*. Recall that we are still wrestling with the question from the first chapter. **Read Ecc. 1:3.**

Wisdom: **Read Ecc. 1:12-18**

The section can be understood by looking at it as two sections: 12-15 and 16-18.

* **Verses 12-15**. What is your initial understanding of what the Teacher is saying? What does he find after seeking out to understand the world?
  + What does verse 15 mean?
    - The Teacher is saying that in trying to understand the world, he has found that trying to manipulate the world around you or seek gain is *hevel*. Futility in life is a failure to accept things the way they are and seeking to come out on top.
* **Verses 16-18**.What is the Teacher focused on here? (He now looks at the value of wisdom itself.)
  + What does he discover about wisdom? What does it bring him?
    - The Teacher will not ultimately say that wisdom is useless – it has led him to important conclusions and is certainly better than folly. But he is saying that wisdom is not an end in itself or a means of overcoming *hevel*. In this sense, it brings sorrow because it demonstrates the pervasiveness of *hevel*.
* “It is often those who have pursued wisdom and knowledge most relentlessly and have probed reality most deeply who understand most fully just how limited still is our understanding at the end of the quest.” (Provan)
  + How have you experienced the limitations of knowledge in your field of study? In your pursuit of understanding God or the Bible?
  + **Read 1 Cor. 1:18-21, 2:6-7**. What does Paul say about wisdom? What does this mean for the way we should pursue and connect with God?
  + What is the proper place of wisdom and knowledge in life?

Searching for Satisfaction: **Read Ecc. 2:1-12** (for detailed notes on drinking wine and embracing folly, see notes section)

* In what ways does the Teacher seek out meaning and value in this section?
* Here we have the Teacher “testing” three different areas: pleasure, work and profit. How have you experienced these things leading you to always desire more?
  + How does the Teacher’s perspective differ from how people usually talk about these things?
* Take a close look at verses 10-11. What is his judgment about his experience? What does it mean that he both found joy in the experience and also judges it as *hevel*?

**Read Ecclesiastes 2:12-16**. To what conclusions does the Teacher come in this section?

* Given what the Teacher said about wisdom in chapter 1, what value does he see in it here?
* How does embracing the reality of death change the Teacher’s perspective?
  + We live in a culture that generally doesn’t face death on a personal level to the extent of historical norms. Obviously, this has changed some with Covid. How does it make you feel to think about your own death? How would it influence the way you live to think about the inevitability of death?
  + Many face death and take the perspective outlined here: **Read Isaiah 22:12-13, 1 Cor. 15:31-32**. Have you encountered this perspective?
  + How does the resurrection influence the way we think about this conversation?

**Read Ecc. 2:17-23**. What is the Teacher’s lament in this section?

* This section has been called “The Confessions of a Workaholic.” Where do you see evidence of that in this section?
  + Would you call yourself a workaholic? What drives you to work so hard?
  + What would it look like for you to honor your God-given limits?

A Life Well-Lived: **Read Ecc. 2:24-26**

The Teacher finally tells us what a well-lived life looks like. What does he say?

* Does enjoying life and what it has to offer seem like an odd idea for God to propose? Why or why not?
  + As Christians, we often think it odd to see pleasure as something that is essentially Christian. But if we understand that God is the giver of all good things, to enjoy His world is nothing less than Christian.
  + How do these verses fit in with the passages in Isaiah and 1 Cor. that we discussed earlier?
* The Teacher is challenging how we view a “good” or “successful” life. It is *hevel* to seek profit from life. “The biblical view of life is that it is designed to be lived in humility and obedience before God, accepting the limitations [of being mortal] and finding joy and satisfaction in the ordinary things of life.”
  + What would it look like to live out these verses? What would it look like to enjoy your life and work as a gift from God rather than a means to an end?

Conclusion and Challenge

“Modern western life in the West, however, is full to the brim with illusion and delusion, as we are constantly told that there are “gains” to be made. There is yet another way to increase our income, yet another way to improve our health and stave off illness and death, yet another way to increase our sexual pleasure. Wisdom and knowledge are portrayed not simply as goods in themselves that enable us to live well in the world, but as ways of “getting ahead” – mechanisms that enable us to fulfill our own personal dreams.” (Provan)

* Can you relate to this statement?
* How have you been challenged by today’s passage? Where are you pushing the boundaries of what God intends for your life?
* This week, try one (or both) of these things as an act of embracing limits and enjoying life:
  + 1. Have a set bedtime this week that would give you a healthy amount of sleep.
  + 2. Intentionally do something you enjoy.

Notes:

* In 1:12 we once again see a king. It could be that the Teacher is a king, or it could be that the Teacher is looking at life from the perspective of a king. Regardless of which view you take, the interpretation is unchanged.
* The phrase in 1:13 (What a heavy burden…) can be difficult to make sense of. I think Iain Provan summarizes it well: “God has “ordained” that life should be a “heavy burden” for humanity in all its striving and struggling and chasing after the wind.” In other words, God is not ordaining that we necessarily have a heavy burden; however, it we make it our end to strive and struggle to understand all things, we will inherit a heavy burden. The Bible stills speaks of this as “God ordained” in the sense that he allows us to chase the wind and suffer the consequences.
* In 1:17, the “madness” is arrogant resistance to God. “Folly” could be a synonym.
* The section about drinking wine is chapter 2 is quite difficult to understand. On one hand, it sounds like he decides to pursue drunkenness, but on the other hand, he insists that he does so guided by wisdom. In other words, it’s like an experiment, not an indulgence in debauchery itself. Provan says this: “He treads one path with his body while taking another with his mind, hoping his intoxicated state to experience the full depths of ‘folly’ and to arrive at discernment.” While this is not totally satisfactory to me, I think it is a good attempt to make sense of this. While I can’t resolve the tension here, I can say that Bible figures are never promised to be perfect. The Teacher says he was guided by wisdom, and that must be true. But are his actions perfect? I don’t think it’s our job to decide that. We are meant to learn from the Teacher, not uphold him as our hero. The negative examples in Ecclesiastes are just that – negative.
* Not too far off the track of the previous note, 2:8 may suggest women purchased as concubines. The way of thinking in the previous note should be applied here also.
* The section of ch. 2 describing the Teacher’s building projects has allusions to Genesis and the paradise of Eden.
* In 2:12 we see the importance of viewing life from the perspective of Solomon. Solomon is known to have the world at his disposal. It is because of this that the Teacher can say that pleasure has been sought thoroughly, to its end. It is not possible that his successor could find more pleasure and override his takeaway regarding the hevel of pleasure.