

# Living a Wise Life

Six sessions applying Old Testament Wisdom Literature to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Living

## Week 6: Wisdom about Life (*Ecclesiastes 2*)

**ICEBREAKER:** This term we've looked at three books of the Old Testament connected to King Solomon – Proverbs, Song of Songs and now Ecclesiastes. Solomon was the wisest and wealthiest person of the time. Would you like to swap places with Solomon? Discuss in small groups and feedback on whether your decision is yes or no?

### Introduction:

We've looked at all sorts of different areas of life, and how we can have wisdom in them – friendships, romantic relationships, our words. Tonight, we are thinking about wisdom in general – wisdom in the whole of life. We all ask the big questions of life at some point. Are we just a bundle of genes wrapped up in human flesh? Are we just monkeys with smoother bottoms? Do we have to conclude with Edmund Blackadder that "Life is like a broken pencil. Pointless"?

Edmund Blackadder said it – but actually, the author of Ecclesiastes, said it first. The author, he calls himself the Teacher but most likely it was Solomon himself, conducts an experiment. He talks about "life under the sun". In other words he is assessing what life is like in the here and now, if you take God out of the equation. His experiment is to discover whether there is any true meaning to life apart from God.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-16

### 1. The Experiment (v.1-10)

#### a. Meaning in Pleasure? (v.1-2)

**The point:** Solomon first turns in the direction of pleasure/fun/laughter to see if he can find ultimate meaning. Read v.1-2. Laughter may be fun. Party poopers are so dreary. Yet laughter and pleasure don't actually hold the key to life.

**The illustration:** Ronnie Barker was one of the "Two Ronnies". Their average viewing figures at their peak in the UK was 21 million – far outstripping the X Factor. This is what Ronnie Barker has written: "I don't think life has any meaning. It has beauty, ugliness, pain, love, hate, great rewards, sometimes enormous responsibilities. It has laughter. But it has no meaning. Life is meaningless."

#### b. Meaning in Alcohol? (v.3)

**The point:** He turns in the direction of the alcohol to find ultimate meaning. Read v.3. All the fun during the evening, but then in the cold light of day, feeling like death warmed up. This was alcohol – but no doubt, if it was the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Solomon would have tried various other drugs. The interesting thing is that Solomon is still thinking about the big questions of life as he goes on his all night booze bender. He says "my mind still guiding me with wisdom". This isn't thought/essly getting hammered, but thoughtfully getting hammered - reflecting on the experience and realising that drink isn't the meaning of life (I don't recommend repeating his experiment!).

15 mins

### c. Meaning in Work? (v.4-6)

**The point:** Solomon goes into construction, the wine industry, landscape gardening, water works. He has a huge workforce and a vast farming business – the biggest in the land. **Read v. 4-6.** Yet, can work provide the meaning of life?

**The illustration:** In a recent interview, David Cameron, certainly a successful worker, said that in the context of his eldest son Ivan's death at the age of six, all his political achievements and work amounted to "nothing".

### d. Meaning in Money? (v.7-8)

**The point:** Solomon had so much money, more than whole countries, more than anyone before him. He's number 1 on the Times Rich List. **Read v.8a.**

### e. Meaning in Sex? (v.8)

**The point:** With wine and song already accounted for, Solomon wasn't going to miss out on women. **Read v.8b.**

**The illustration:** Most recently, Tiger Woods reminds us that sex is not the meaning to life. These are Tiger's words – "I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me...I was wrong and I was foolish."

### f. Meaning in Fame? (v.9)

**The point:** Solomon was the most famous of all. **Read v.9**

**The illustration:** His conclusion is in line with the famous author, Jack Higgins. Higgins was asked, "What do you know at 60, that you wish you'd known at 16?". He replied, "I wish I'd known that when you get to the top there is nothing there".

**The application:** Once we've thought about laughter and pleasure and drink and work and money and sex and fame, if the key to life is about any of these things - these possessions, these experiences - then all of us would swap places with Solomon in an instant. Solomon has been there, done that, got the T shirt. In fact, he has bought the T shirt company.

**BUZZ GROUP:** When you are not feeling happy and fulfilled, how do you look to solve the problem? Which of these six are you most tempted to run to in order to try and bring fulfilment and meaning and joy to your life?

## 2. The Verdict (v.11-16)

30 mins

**The point:** Solomon's verdict is that there is no ultimate meaning if we cut God out of the equation. **Read v.11.** Solomon had tried it all. And it hadn't fulfilled.

**The illustration:** Other rich and famous people have come to similar conclusions. The title of Michael Caine's autobiography – "What's it all about?". Bob Geldof's autobiography – "Is that it?". Kenneth Williams finished his autobiography on the day he died. The last line of his autobiography read: "So what's the bloody point?".

**The application:** Solomon, and all these people, aren't saying that work, drink, fame and laughter are without pleasure and enjoyment. Of course not. Pleasure is pleasurable. Sex, a foreign holiday, a loving family, good friends, playing golf. All pleasureable.

But none of them are satisfying in the sense of giving ultimate meaning to life. So often, for each of us, if we haven't managed to find ultimate meaning and purpose to life, we declare that it's because our resources are limited. "Once I have such and such, then I'll be happy and fulfilled", we think. "Once I've got this or done that". It's always once, once, once. But we are never satisfied with "life under the sun".

This verdict of "meaningless" is for two reasons:

#### a. The Wisdom of God (v.11)

**The point:** The Christian claim is that God will not let us find the ultimate meaning of life in any of these things, because very simply the meaning of life is not found in anything else. The meaning of life is only found in God.

In God's wisdom, he knows that if I begin to be satisfied without him then I won't bother with him, and then I will miss out not only on the real meaning to life now, but even more devastatingly, I will miss out on life to come. Eternal life, the life with God that starts now and goes on for eternity, promises total satisfaction for ever.

**The illustration:** If earlier today you had seen me just running around in circles on the road, grabbing into thin air, you'd rightly think I was a bit strange. Even more so, if you stopped me, and asked me what I was doing, and I replied, "Sorry, can't stop to chat, I'm just chasing the wind". But that's what Solomon says about the person who looks for the meaning to life outside of God. It is foolish and illogical. As Jesus himself said, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul?" (Mark 8:36).

**The application:** If I keep trying to find meaning to life in something else, then I am pushing God out - even if it is a perfectly good thing like family or friends or work that is taking God's place. If I find ultimate meaning in something else, then I am saying "I don't want you, God. I am living for this thing, not you". To be brutally honest, as well as being illogical, this is an offence against God.

#### b. The Reality of Eternity (v.12-16)

**The point:** "Life under the sun" is meaningless, supremely, because we all die. Read v.14. Meaning only exists if eternity is real.

**The illustration:** Richard Dawkins famously finishes one of his books with the sentence, "the universe we observe has ... no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. ... DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music". Dawkins admits there is no ultimate meaning and purpose in "life under the sun". However, Solomon declares "God has set eternity in

**the human heart**” (3:11). C S Lewis writes a similar thing to Solomon. He says, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world”.

**The application:** Solomon and C S Lewis say that God – as revealed in Jesus Christ - is where ultimate meaning is found, and it is by getting in a right relationship with him that we can experience ultimate fulfillment for all eternity. The wisest thing we can do in life is to begin, develop and invest in a relationship with Jesus. As John writes in his first letter, “**God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life**” (1 John 5:11-12). Jesus came that we might have “**life in all its fullness**” (John 10:10). All the inner dissatisfaction and restlessness from a futile search for the meaning to life disappears when we find our meaning and rest in Jesus. As St. Augustine famously prayed, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”.

45 mins

**MINISTRY TIME:** It might be appropriate to pray a “prayer of commitment” for some people in the pastorate who are not yet certain whether they have started out a life with Jesus. Then, in buzz groups, share and pray for each person’s relationship with Jesus to develop, grow and deepen.