

What Solomon Learned About Life

Series on Ecclesiastes

Over the past few weeks we have been leafing through the Solomon's journal, where he gives us his observations about life. The observations come from a man who was enormously rich, intellectually at the top of his class, creative, artistic, absolute blue blood royalty, who has had everything he ever wanted. He could travel where he wanted, buy what he wanted, do what he wanted and have whoever he wanted. His journal is done a bit like a photo album of snapshots about life, with comments underneath each group of photos. So sit down with Solomon and let him take you through his photo album of life.

The Photo Album Of Life

The album is headed with some questions on the front page. Questions like "What's life all about? Why am I here? What will make me happy?"

Palaces

So he opens the first page to photos of magnificent palaces and gardens. "Look at this" he says to us. "These are my palaces that I designed and built. All these parks, gardens, lakes, trees and landscaping. These are my achievements." Underneath the photograph he has written "It doesn't satisfy."

People

He turns the page to show us the people in his life. There are slaves by the score. Singers. Choirs. He needed a wide angled lens to get a shot of his family, for there were 700 wives and 300 concubines. His whole harem available to him to meet his every sexual fantasy. And the caption is the same, "meaningless, unbelievably meaningless".

Wealth

The next page are photos of his wealth. Silver and gold, whole mountains of the stuff. Ships bringing in 25 tons of gold each year for every year he was King. Golden bowls to eat out of. Such luxury the photos don't do it justice. But the conclusion is the same - meaningless.

Life

Then there are his photos of life in his time. The business world where the poor are oppressed. Politics where the honest get trampled. Law courts where justice is a joke. Universities where knowledge consumes those who seek it. Under each collection of photos is a cynical caption - "empty, futile, this is the pits". There are even photos of dead people and stillborn babies with cynical captions underneath saying "How lucky you are you never lived! How fortunate you are that you are dead now and you don't have to live in this cesspit called life". His photographs are all cynicism, doubt, despair, gloom, death, and oppression. They are stark photographs in black and white. It's a photo journal of life under the sun without God, and it's empty.

As we get to the end of the photo album, Solomon gives some wise advice. It comes from a man who has "been there, done that". He speaks to the younger generation first. ***"Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastes 11:9 -12:1)***

Enjoy Life When You Are Young!

At first reading it sounds like he is saying to young people to do what he did. Live a hedonistic life. Go out and do whatever you please. Have a blast while you last. Just live it up and don't worry about the consequences. Live like the young people did on the streets of London, Birmingham and Manchester recently. Smash and grab what you can for yourself while you can, and don't worry about getting caught. Whatever you feel like doing, do it! Is that what Solomon is saying? Not quite. Yes, he is encouraging young people to enjoy life. He's telling them to enjoy their youth. He's encouraging them to enjoy all of the good things that God has created for them to enjoy. But he's also reminding them that God will hold us all to account for everything we do, because everything we decide matters for eternity. How we spend our money. What we do with our bodies. What we do with our time. How we handle relationships. What we touch, taste, see and hear – all of this matters to God. So he is saying, have fun, but remember that there is a God in heaven.

Our God is not watching over us waiting for us to make mistakes so he can whack us around the ears. He's a loving father who wants the best for us. He made this beautiful world for us to enjoy. He wants us to live life to the full. But he wants us to live life responsibly, because he loves us so much. He doesn't want to see us get hurt. And it's while we are young that we are able to live life to the full. But we are reminded not to forget about our Creator. The New Living Bible says this **"Don't let the excitement of youth cause you to forget your Creator. Honour him in your youth before you grow old and no longer enjoy living"**. It is exciting being young. It is exciting discovering all the things God has made for us to enjoy. And Solomon is saying "Go for it when you are young, because the days are coming when you won't be able to enjoy life so much". He uses the picture of a house that is falling down, to describe what happens to us in old age.

***"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them - before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him— before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."* (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7)**

The Old House That Falls Apart

I'm not sure this is the best interpretation of these verses, but some commentators have seen parallels in these verses to what happens to our bodies. Strong men become stooped. The grinders are teeth that don't work or fall out. The windows grow dim through failing eyesight. The doors are ears that are growing deaf to the sound of noise in the street. Vocal chords don't allow us to sing the way we used to.

The almond tree is a reference to hair that turns white. We have trouble getting to sleep, then we wake up early with the birds. Things we once were passionate about no longer hold their appeal. Ultimately, the old house just collapses, and we die.

Enjoy Life When You Are Old!

This isn't just a call for young people to enjoy life. Solomon says to us **"Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all."** (*Ecclesiastes 11:7- 8*) If you have lived many years, find joy in the simple pleasures of life. The taste of honey. The joy of music. The sun shining on the Mt Blanc on a clear winters day. A blazing campfire on a chilly night. The joy of holding a newborn baby. The warm hug of a 3 year old child. The close companionship of a friend. Schluter coffee. There is so much of life to enjoy, if only we will appreciate what we have.

So we come to the final words at the end of this journal. Here they are. **"Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails— given by one Shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."** (*Ecclesiastes 12:9 -14*)

The Prod From God.

He says at the end of his journal "I've chosen my words very carefully. I've searched out just the right words". Why? Because he wanted these words to be like goads. A goad is a long stick with sharp point on the end that is pushed into the thick hide of a stubborn Ox. He says "I wanted these words to be like nails". Long sharp nails driven home hard pinning us to the truth. That's why the Holy Spirit inspired him to write, because these truths about life without God need to penetrate our thick hides and our stubborn wills. They need to nail us down hard to the realities of life without God. When we are tempted to kid ourselves that money will satisfy and possessions will bring peace, and a lot of sexual conquests will bring happiness, these words nail us down and goad us into facing reality that life without God is empty and futile. Solomon finishes his journal by anchoring us in truth that will never change. Some quiet advice from an old man who has seen more, done more and had more than you and I ever will.

He says, "Fear God and keep his commandments. That's where happiness is. Take God seriously when he speaks. Do what he says because He's going to bring every action, every thought to judgement."

If you and I come away from this book of Ecclesiastes with a clear conviction that a life without God doesn't satisfy, and that a life lived in relationship with our Creator is the most fulfilling life we can experience, we will have grasped a truth that will make all the difference to us for the rest of our days. May it be so.

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