

Searching for the Meaning of Life
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18
March 5, 2017

When Solomon was younger, he had an encounter with God. God appeared to him one night in a dream and told him, "You ask Me whatever you want and I will give it to you." (1 Kings 3:5)

What a deal! To be given anything, no matter how big, what would you ask? What is your heart's desire? As for Solomon, he asked for wisdom. He asked for "an understanding heart" to be able to lead the people of God and to be able to discern between good and evil (1 Kings 3:9).

The Lord commended his choice. The Lord said to him, "You could have chosen wealth or a long life or conquest over your enemies, but you didn't. And because you asked for wisdom, I am not only going to make you the wisest man of all, but I am going to give to you all of those other things as a bonus." (1 Kings 3:10-14)

Solomon then begins a journey in his life to know everything there is to know about life...its meaning.

Solomon said that he has been king over Israel...which is not in past tense, but in perfect tense, meaning that he is still king over Israel. He is nearing the end of his life, and he is looking back at what he had done as king of Israel. He is stating that he pursued knowledge and wisdom to find meaning in life.

I. The Answer is 42 (12-13a)

The title came from a book The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The situation is that some group of people built the universe's smartest computer and built it for only one purpose...to find the meaning of life. So the people asked the computer the answer to Life. Universe. Everything. The computer told the group that it would take 7.5 million years to figure out the answer. After 7.5 million years has passed, the builders had a huge public relation event, staging the event in front of a massive crowd of people, showing on screen in front of trillions of people across the universe. The computer gave the answer to Life. Universe. Everything. as 42. (Read the book to figure out what the computer meant!)

The author was explaining that to find such an answer is impossible, so he picked a random number to explain the impossibility of answering that question.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!

14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge."

17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Even before the author of that book (Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy), Solomon attempts to find the answer to the meaning of life. Solomon explains in **verses 12-18** that he is searching for the meaning

of life apart from God (under the sun)...how to solve problems, how to answer life's most puzzling questions.

- Solomon explores (seeks) wisdom under the sun
- Solomon devotes his time and energy into searching for such meaning
- Solomon seeks everything under heaven

What Solomon seeks is how far wisdom can take us into understanding the meaning of life. How does this wisdom under the sun solve life's problems? How can wisdom under the sun help find eternal life? As Solomon goes deeper into his studies, he realizes that it is meaningless. Man's wisdom cannot and will not solve problems of the world or give us eternal life.

II. Solving Problems—Man's Way (13 b-15)

- Heavy burden (lousy job)
 - We are limited by our own five senses
 - We are limited to our time
 - We are limited to the material world (we cannot see or understand the spiritual world)
- Increasing frustration
 - Brings sorrow and grief
 - The more you know...the more you realize you do not know and cannot know
 - Example: Science and philosophy
- Inability to solve problems
 - We cannot solve all problems (what is crooked cannot be straightened)
 - We cannot find all information (what is lacking cannot be counted)
 - Examples: crime—we cannot solve crime; death—we cannot find out why we die (man's wisdom)

III. Right in Men's Eyes (16-18)

- Solomon attempts to understand right and wrong under the sun
- Madness / folly—human understanding apart from God (not insanity)
 - According to God—this type of wisdom is foolishness

Genesis 6:5 *The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*

Judges 21:25 *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

Proverbs 12:15 *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.*

Solomon took that wisdom which was given to him by God and he worked it. He set out upon an intellectual journey *to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven (1:13)*. He looked and he studied and he thought and he pondered. What did he find? He found that rationalism ultimately has no answer that satisfies. It is all empty. If intellectualism brought fulfillment, then our colleges and universities would bring world peace. Knowledge doesn't make a person happier. It has just the opposite effect. It brings grief (**Verse 18**). Increasing knowledge results in increasing pain (**1:18**). We realize that we have no power to change anything.

IV. Wisdom of God

What Solomon says here about wisdom seems to contradict what Solomon says in Proverbs.

***Proverbs 1:7** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*

***Proverbs 2:10** When wisdom enters your heart, and knowledge is pleasant to your soul,*

***Proverbs 3:13** Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding;*

***Proverbs 4:7** Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.*

Is there a contradiction? What does Solomon mean here? Why is he saying that to gain knowledge is to have grief? Always keep in mind that Solomon is talking about wisdom under the sun (**1:14**). And everything under the sun is a life living apart from God. If we rely on the under the sun wisdom, we need to remember that God says that He will destroy the wisdom of the wise.

***Isaiah 29:14** Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.*

If God destroys the wisdom of the wise (the wisdom under the sun), then what wisdom does God approve? What wisdom does God want us to have?

***Jeremiah 9:23-24** This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, **24** but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me.*

***1 Corinthians 1:23-24** but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

The only solution to our world's problem (namely sin) is found only in Christ, the Wisdom of God (**Colossians 2:2-3**) . He alone can provide the answer to the meaning of life because in Him is life.

***Luke 3:4-6** as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight. **5** Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth; **6** and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

Wisdom that Solomon promotes is the skill of living in the fear of God. So what Solomon is saying is that if we try to apply everything we have learned under the sun, the wisdom apart from God, then all of that wisdom is meaningless because there are no answers to be found. We will never solve life's riddles or unravel its complexities. It can never erase sin's guilt. Only in Christ is there no condemnation (**Romans 8:1**).