

The Surprising Virtue of Emptiness

Dark Clouds, Silver Linings-part 2

October 12, 2014

DAY 1: The Ecclesiastes-Experience

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

² *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

1. You may find that a strange thing for a teacher, a prince and a man once known as the wisest man that ever lived to say!

2. Solomon tried some of the things you and I try to fill our emptiness, and to make sense of life. But, no matter what he tried, he eventually discovered that his efforts fell short, didn't last, or didn't drive deep enough into the human heart. The effect was a sense of meaninglessness.

3. Last week we saw how he tried to use marriage, women and sex to fill loneliness.

4. This week we'll look at pleasure.

Ecclesiastes 2:1 I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good."

5. He began with a thesis: Let's see if pleasure will fill me up.

Eccl. 2:1 ...But that also proved to be meaningless.

6. When he had finished this was his conclusion. What thoughts come to your mind?

7. When you have attempted to fill an inner emptiness with outer pleasure, how successful were you? Did you find that even the best pleasures:

a. Fell short? How? _____

b. Didn't last long enough? _____

c. Didn't drive deep enough in your heart? Amplify: _____

8. Much to his surprise, Solomon discovered the same thing!

Ecclesiastes 2:2 "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?"

DAY 2: Pleasure on demand

Ecclesiastes 2:3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

1. What things did Solomon try in order bring pleasure to his life? Look for three things.

2. It's interesting to me that he tried two "worldly" ways while attempting to still be guided by wisdom. Hmmm. I remember trying to do that. Failed miserably. What is an example where you tried to "embrace folly" while "trying to be 'smart' about it?"

Ecclesiastes 2:4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

⁵ *I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.*

⁶ *I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.*

3. Having tried some pleasures he shouldn't have tried, he now dives into pleasures that are "socially acceptable." Underline everything he tried.

4. Is there anything morally wrong with any of these?

5. Take a guess. How successful do you think these efforts were in filling emptiness and finding meaning in his life?

6. Have you tried something of his methods? How successful were your efforts in filling emptiness and finding meaning in your life?

7. What things are missing from this excerpt of his diary?

- a. About God?

- b. About what Solomon's trying to accomplish?

- c. The intersection of pleasing God, advancing God's work and Solomon's efforts and desires?

Day 3: Money, sex and power???

1. Let's take a few more snippets from his diary. Underneath each example, write down what Solomon thought would happen, particularly inside himself, through these efforts?

Ecclesiastes 2:7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house....

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:7 ...I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

Your thoughts:

Ecclesiastes 2:8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces...

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:8...I acquired men and women singers, ...

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:8 ... and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man.

Your thoughts:

2. Take a guess. How successful do you think these efforts were in filling emptiness and finding meaning in his life?

3. Have you tried something of his methods? How successful were your efforts in filling emptiness and finding meaning in your life?

4. What things are missing from this excerpt of his diary?

a. About God?

b. About what Solomon's trying to accomplish?

c. The intersection of pleasing God, advancing God's work and Solomon's efforts and desires?

DAY 4: Emptiness too great for even man's greatest efforts

1. Let's continue peeking in at Solomon's diary. Under each entry, jot down what Solomon thought would happen through each of his efforts:

Eccl. 2:9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired...

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:10 ...I refused my heart no pleasure.

Your thoughts:

Eccl. 2:10 ...My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.

Your thoughts:

Eccl 2:11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

2. Summarize in your own words the conclusions Solomon drew after all his efforts.

3. Even man's "greatest" efforts to fill himself up, to fill a gnawing sense of emptiness will always (a) not be enough, (b) not last long enough, and (c) not be deep enough.

4. Living for ourselves, even under the guise of living for others is not big enough. The stage is not big enough, the stakes are not big enough, the impact is not big enough.

5. Jot down your general thoughts from the study, so far this week.

DAY 5: Meaning From God and Through God

1. Solomon's "diary" is pretty bleak, and that's the point. Solomon attempted to find meaning:

- Without having to depend on God
- Through his own efforts: talents, gifts, relating, etc.

2. The *natural* result of every endeavor was "Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless." (Eccl. 1:2)

3. As the book ends, he *finally* lands his plane on two solid "runways"!

Ecclesiastes 12:1 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"--

4. What is Solomon's advice?

5. What do you think he means by "remember" your Creator? Does he mean a casual, "Oh, yeah, God is my creator" or do you think he means something more? Give a few examples of what the "more" is.

6. Remembering my Creator is to make God my "first thing" pleasure, my "first thing" priority, my "first thing" anchor, my "first thing" hope, my "first thing" love, etc.

Point #1: Man can only find his core meaning in a "first thing" relationship with God.

7. Let's go to Solomon's second "runway."

Ecclesiastes 12:13 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. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

8. To fear God means:

- To take Him and His commandments seriously
- To know that "your sin will find you out"
- To know that every sin, though it can be forgiven, carries consequences.

9. The lack of fearing God opened the gate to many side roads, and many dead ends.

Point #2: God gives meaning in your everyday life as you make Him first thing priority.

10. Let's wrap up this week.

a. What have been your *real* "first thing" priorities, loves, pleasures, etc?

b. Jot down a few thoughts as to making God your first thing priority, pleasure, etc.