A Son Learns True Wisdom

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Wisdom is found in recognizing the futility of pursuing the things of the world.

MAIN PASSAGE: Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:11

In the fourth century, Augustine, age seventeen, set out to find wisdom and fulfillment. He embraced a hedonistic, dualistic religious philosophy, which ridiculed his mother’s Christian faith in favor of rationalism and permitted his desire for sexual exploits.

But he found no fulfillment. Instead, he felt enslaved to his passions and struggled for freedom within himself. One day, Augustine heard a child chanting a playground jingle: “Take and read.” So Augustine picked up a collection of Paul’s epistles and read Romans 13:13-14: “Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t make plans to gratify the desires of the flesh.” Reading these verses at this time changed the course of Augustine’s life, and he became one of the most influential theologians in church history.¹

What are some ways people try to find fulfillment apart from God?

Voices from Church History

“Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee.”²

—Augustine (c. 354–430)

¹ What are some ways people try to find fulfillment apart from God?
Group Time

**Point 1: The Futility of Human Wisdom (Eccl. 1:12-18)**

12 I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied. 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

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

16 I said to myself, “See, I have amassed wisdom far beyond all those who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has thoroughly grasped wisdom and knowledge.” 17 I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind.

18 For with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases.

Solomon wanted the reader to understand that everything is like a **breath**, like a mist that vanishes—everything is “futile” (see Eccl. 1:2-3). Nothing lasts, and if nothing lasts, then nothing matters. Even human life is like a vapor (see Jas. 4:14). Of course, one’s perspective matters. All of life is under God’s sovereign rule, but so often we live as if life “under the sun” is all there is. This is like trying to chase after the wind—futile.

How might an “under the sun” perspective manifest itself in our lives?

Another way to say life “under the sun” is to say life **without faith** in the one true God. The grand experiment of Ecclesiastes was this wise man taking his God-given wisdom to explore all this world had to offer for its own sake. But all Solomon’s wisdom did was bury him in sadness because his **human** wisdom had no meaning. Life and wisdom and even the Book of Ecclesiastes only make sense when they are linked to God in faith.

**Illumination of Scripture:** When it comes to understanding the ____________ of God’s Word, Christians do not rely ultimately upon human ____________ in the process of interpretation, nor do we rely solely upon an institution or body of scholars. Instead, a Christian’s ultimate reliance is upon the work of the ____________ of God, who illuminates the Scriptures in the heart and mind.
Point 2: The Futility of Pleasure (Eccl. 2:1-3)

1 I said to myself, “Go ahead, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy what is good.” But it turned out to be futile. 2 I said about laughter, “It is madness,” and about pleasure, “What does this accomplish?” 3 I explored with my mind the pull of wine on my body—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to grasp folly, until I could see what is good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

Why do laughter and pleasure fail to satisfy us? Does God disapprove of happiness? Does He frown on smiling? Not at all. God is not just permissive of our enjoyment, He is for our enjoyment. We are to enjoy God and enjoy what God has provided. The problem for Solomon, and for many people today, was that he was viewing pleasure and laughter as ends in themselves. But laughter and cheer are always intended to lead us back to God, the author of joy.

What does faithful enjoyment of God's good gifts look like?

Solomon moved on to the next item on his “fulfillment quest” bucket list: wine. In saying his mind was still guided by wisdom, Solomon was investigating the pleasures of wine without debauchery, but he still saw this as grasping for folly. Once again, what he pursued for pleasure to satisfy his heart let him down in the end. It always does because our hearts were not designed to be filled with wine but filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

How have you seen the pleasures of this world lead people astray?
Point 3: The Futility of Possessions (Eccl. 2:4-11)

4 I increased my achievements. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.  
5 I made gardens and parks for myself and planted every kind of fruit tree in them.  
6 I constructed reservoirs for myself from which to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees.  
7 I acquired male and female servants and had slaves who were born in my house.  
I also owned livestock—large herds and flocks—more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.  
8 I also amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I gathered male and female singers for myself, and many concubines, the delights of men.  
9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; my wisdom also remained with me.  
10 All that my eyes desired, I did not deny them. I did not refuse myself any pleasure, for I took pleasure in all my struggles. This was my reward for all my struggles.  
11 When I considered all that I had accomplished and what I had labored to achieve, I found everything to be futile and a pursuit of the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Solomon was in pursuit of Solomon. If our cultural maxim today is true—“I have to do what’s right for me”—then Solomon should have been the happiest man ever. But he wasn’t. None of his accomplishments, achievements, and acquisitions satisfied him. Even these lined the path of futility. But centuries after Solomon, one of his descendants, Jesus, would show the world the different, true path to fulfillment—Himself.

Don’t look to Solomon for the secret to fulfillment.

Look to Jesus, the ________________ and ________________ of our faith.

In his pursuit of possessions, Solomon again recognized that his wisdom had not left him (vv. 3,9). Perhaps this was more a statement about God’s faithfulness than Solomon’s restraint. God had promised David in 2 Samuel 7:15 that His faithful love would never leave Solomon. Wisdom can lead to moderation and even provide one with the ability to handle excess, but what we all need is the God-given wisdom revealed in the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why do people struggle to see the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealing God’s wisdom?
My Mission

Because God has given us His wisdom in place of our foolishness, we live with purpose as we call on others to turn to Jesus Christ, who became wisdom from God for us.

- How will you turn from your pursuits of wisdom, pleasure, and possessions to Jesus Christ, the true wisdom of God?
- How can your group display the true joy of relationship with Christ to one another and to the community around you?
- Who is pursuing what cannot fulfill, and how will you point this person to the fulfillment found only in Christ?

Voices from Church History

“Jesus love me! this I know, For the Bible tells me so; Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus love me, The Bible tells me so.”

—Anna B. Warner (1827-1915)
Day 1: Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Consider the three books Solomon wrote—Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—and how each one appears to follow the seasons of Solomon’s life. Song of Solomon perhaps depicts the king’s demeanor while he was young and in love. Proverbs captures him during his peak years in terms of his learning and influence. Ecclesiastes reflects the latter stages of his life, when he was feeling dissatisfied, cynical, and confused with things the way they are and always seem to be. Reading Ecclesiastes, the overall feeling is thus disillusionment and despair. It’s the kind of book that, if you didn’t know better, might surprise you was even in the Bible.

But God’s Word is absolutely true, not just in what it says about God but in what it says about us as well. Solomon’s despair toward the end of his life is echoed in popular culture, such as in Orson Welles’s character in the movie classic Citizen Kane. In non-linear fashion, the film tells the story of a reporter trying to decipher the final word (“Rosebud”) of an extravagantly wealthy publishing mogul who, despite his “rags to riches” success in life, dies in evident despair. As this 1941 movie illustrates, fame and wealth are not adequate means for solving the crisis of despair that faces all of us in our frail and mortal humanity.

As Solomon himself said, “There is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9). How do you resolve the crisis? We know the answer that Solomon—and all whose material abundance fails to satisfy them—yearned for: Christ Jesus. Because of Christ, we need not despair. Life is not devoid of purpose. In Christ, we have been given treasure upon treasure, one of which is understanding that we live today not for today, not for tomorrow, but for eternity.

What could you change today to keep you from feeling like Solomon at the end of your life?
Day 2: Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

In verses 16-18, Solomon seemed to make the same mistake many of us make: treating wisdom and knowledge as synonyms. But in the Hebrew, these are two distinct concepts. Knowledge (yada) is “the apprehension of the mind of some fact.” Wisdom (hokma) is “a moral rather than an intellectual quality.” As someone has said, knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit and not a vegetable; wisdom is knowing not to put one in a fruit salad.

But we can go a step further. Wisdom is not just a moral quality. Solomon himself personified divine wisdom when he wrote, “I, wisdom, share a home with shrewdness” (Prov. 8:12). Paul called Christ “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). So wisdom is not an intellectual fact or simply a moral quality. Wisdom is a Person who can dwell with you. The key to living well and rightly in this world is to continually abide with Jesus—“Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

How has abiding in Christ kept you from despair?

Day 3: Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-3

“I said to myself.” There are numerous stories that begin this same way and end the same way as well: badly. Often what we tell ourselves is terrible. We give ourselves horrible advice. We lie to ourselves. We flatter ourselves.

There are six times in Scripture (all in Ecclesiastes) where the phrase “I said to myself” is used, and in all six, the Hebrew literally reads, “My heart said…” In our world, following your heart is a romantic notion. It’s what dreamers, poets, and adventurers do. The only problem is that according to Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?” The sinful, unregenerate heart will get us in trouble—every single time. This is why we can’t follow our heart. It’s the worst possible thing we can do. The path to fulfillment is not to follow our heart; it is to ask God for a new one, to have God rip the old, sin-ravaged, deceptive heart of stone out of your chest and replace it with a new, grace-saturated, redeemed heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). Only such a new heart, given to us by God, inclined toward God, and controlled by God is worth trusting.

The last time you followed your heart, was it your old heart of stone or your new heart of flesh? What was the result?
Day 4: Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-17

Comedian Mark Lowry sings a song about settling down in first class on a flight home to Nashville, only to hear the pilot announce the destination is Omaha. His song, “First Class, Wrong Flight,” contains this lyrical response, “I thought why should I sweat it, I’ll eat my steak and smile. It’s not important where I go, I’m going there in style.”

That attitude sums up Solomon’s description of his life in Ecclesiastes 2:4-17. He had the best of everything, but when he considered all he had accomplished and worked for, he found “everything to be futile and a pursuit of the wind” (v. 11).

When you come to the end of your life, will your first-class flight have delivered you to your desired destination? This is a question with eternal implications as well as earthly ones. From an earthly perspective, you may find yourself like Solomon, feeling like you have wasted your life trying to please yourself instead of investing your life on behalf of others. But Solomon knew that God has “put eternity in [our] hearts” (3:11). We are all headed to one of two eternal destinations. It’s important to know that, but it is also important to consider what we are doing as we travel along the way.

How are you investing in eternity today? In what other ways can you begin to live more for eternity than the here and now?

Day 5: Read Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

Solomon summed up the futility of his quest for meaning in Ecclesiastes 2:24: “There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work.” On the surface, this is another one of those verses from Ecclesiastes that almost sounds like it shouldn’t be in the Bible. Really? “Nothing better?” It sounds so bleak, even nihilistic. Moreover, a literal translation of the text might read, “There is no good in a person who eats and drinks and enjoys his work.”

Okay. That’s still bleak, but it makes a lot of sense because it is universally true. Humans are incapable of creating anything good on their own. But here’s the ray of hope: Our heavenly Father delights to give us good gifts. As James says, “Every good and every perfect gift is from above” (Jas. 1:17). Without God, there is nothing good. But with God, there is nothing better.

What are some ways you have experienced the goodness of God this week?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- The Futility of Human Wisdom (Eccl. 1:12-18)
- The Futility of Pleasure (Eccl. 2:1-3)
- The Futility of Possessions (Eccl. 2:4-11)

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

Which pursuits of earthly wisdom, pleasure, or possessions tend to distract you from finding ultimate satisfaction in Christ? What will it look like to stay focused on all that God is for you and has for you in Christ?

Why should we not see all earthly pursuits of knowledge and recreation as inherently bad or sinful? How does our doctrine of creation help us put temporal realities into proper perspective?

Notes
UNIT 10

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5

SESSION 6

UNIT 11

SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

SESSION 4
3. Martin Luther, Luther's Large Catechism, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, MN: The Luther Press, 1908), 44.
In this volume of *The Gospel Project*, we cover the roughly one hundred and twenty years of Israel’s heyday: the united monarchy. After decades of the devastating cycle of sin and deliverance and being ruled by a series of judges, the Israelites called on Samuel to appoint a king for them—one like those of the nations around them. God warned His people that what they were requesting would lead to heartache and trouble, but they insisted. So God, in His kindness, gave them what they wanted in order to teach them to trust Him.

What followed was a series of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon, each ruling for about forty years. In some ways, these kings provide us with examples to follow: the fierce determination of David not to stand for anyone impugning God’s character; the mercy and kindness David showed to a foe and his family; the wisdom of Solomon. But we also discover that each of these three men fell woefully short of being the king God’s people wanted and needed, each one proving God’s warnings true. Bookending God’s people crying out as one for a king at the start of this volume, by the time we finish, we encounter God’s people being divided into two kingdoms.

Our takeaway is clear: The hope of humanity does not rest in any human king or leader but is fixed solely and securely in the King of kings, Jesus Christ. But at the same time, we see that God delights in using His people despite their failings. God would fulfill His covenant with David, even though he committed adultery and murder. This reaffirmed the promises God had made to Abraham generations before. And though Solomon would succumb to polygamy and idolatry, God used him to build the temple, a place for God’s people to worship and be in relationship with God.

So consider as you study: What might God do through us?