

King of the Mountain

Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 5

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

In his day, King Solomon was essentially the most brilliant man alive. Financially, materially, and intellectually – he had it all. He was the king of the mountain, and yet it wasn't enough. He found no advantage in striving after the meaning of life. He discovered that nobody has any advantage. It may seem you have lasting happiness in life, only to watch it slip through your fingers. Solomon realized some bitter truths regarding life under the sun which still ring true today.

Discussion Points:

As Solomon studied life while pursuing wisdom and folly, he realized that none of it brings meaning to life.

- Why doesn't anybody, whether striving for wisdom or delving into madness, have any kind of advantage over another in chasing after meaning in life?
- In what situations in your life have you wondered, 'Man, there's got to be something more?' Does this question drive you toward or away from spiritual things – why?
- Why might the intuition and perception of a brilliant mind with street smarts and amazing observational and analytical skill not bring satisfaction in life?

No matter how much we know, there are frustrations we cannot solve.

- How could this knowledge impact your life 'under the sun', as well as your spiritual life?
- In what ways can this truth be seen in the world in the way it handles its frustrations?
- Why does knowledge without God lead to frustration?

No matter how much we learn, there are sorrows we cannot avoid.

- Why would knowledge not alleviate sorrows?
- How is it that the more you know the more troubled, concerned, and burdened you often become?
- In what ways can this truth encourage people to seek after God and true wisdom?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Without a Savior who reigns above the sun and a Redeemer to lead, forgive, and give you a future and a hope, you are left to your own wisdom and resources to try to find a moment of happiness. The solution to dealing with the frustrations of life has never been found through information but, rather, transformation, which begins at salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Practical Implications:

Think: Am I living my life in a quest to be the king of the mountain or am I in search of the wisdom of God?

Pray: Thank God for providing a path for true wisdom. Ask Him to help you seek His ways.

Do: Seek His wisdom over the knowledge offered under the sun.

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Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Several stelae – or stone slabs – have been excavated in Egypt, declaring the power and might and skill of their Pharaohs who reigned as supposed descendants of the sun-god.

Evidently, Amenhotep II, who reigned in 1447 B.C., was especially fond of commissioning this kind of advertisement extolling his skill as a superhuman because several have survived.

One stela reads:

There was no one like him in his numerous army. There was no one who could draw his bow in the army [like him]. He could not be surpassed in running. When he took [up] the oar, he rowed at the stern of his falcon-boat as [fast as] 200 men. He prevailed over every foreign country, whether people or horses. Raging like a panther when he treads the field of battle, there is none who can fight in his vicinity; even though they have come [against him] in millions of men.ⁱ

About 350 years later, another king from a neighboring region wrote this of himself – I am the king of the world, king of all four rims of the earth, the courageous hero who overthrew all his enemies; [I am] king of the world.ⁱⁱ

Did I mention, I am the king of the world!

Can you imagine if he lived today how his Facebook profile would read – King of the

world? How about for his LinkedIn account – I own the world?

The truth is, for a few years, these guys were king of the mountain. They had it all! The world was their playground and office suite all rolled up into one. They were the uncontested champion of the world.

Three hundred years later another king comes along and now sits on top of the world. In fact, the Pharaoh of Egypt, along with all the other kingdoms from India to Ethiopia, were paying him annual tribute in solid gold. He was not only on top of the world militarily and economically but intellectually.

In fact, he spends some time in his memoirs recording his profile. And because the Spirit of God was behind the scenes inspiring this best-selling memoir, we happen to have a copy of it in our Bibles. Let's pick up our study in the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, chapter 1.

In our last exposition, Solomon pictures himself as a great explorer:

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 1:12-14).

I explored it all, yet everything I found couldn't deliver lasting satisfaction; purpose and meaning in life was as elusive as trying to catch the wind in a net!

Next Solomon delivers a hard-hitting, realistic proverb in *verse 15*:

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted
(Ecclesiastes 1:15).

In our last session we pulled from that proverb two principles. First, what is crooked cannot be made straight. In other words, no matter how hard you try, there are dilemmas you can't straighten out. The world is broken and you can't fix the world and you can't fix all the people in the world, in fact, you can't even fix yourself.

Solomon goes on to add another principle - what is lacking cannot be counted. In other words, no matter how much you have, there are deficiencies you cannot supply. You don't have enough money in the bank to handle every emergency and you don't have enough strength or ability to handle the challenges of life.

Even though Solomon was king of the world, he knew in his heart that humanity was broken and his own life was deficient. He goes on to describe himself, not as a great explorer, but as a great scholar, in *verse 16*:

I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge"
(Ecclesiastes 1:16).

'I surpassed everybody else in wisdom and knowledge', and, truth be told, this was not an exaggeration on his resume. Solomon had been granted a photographic memory, an amazing ability to catalog, observe and discern, to synthesize, analyze and summarize.

Solomon wasn't just a smart kid who got to erase the chalkboard because he was the teacher's helper. (Did you get to do that? I

wanted to do that, but the closest I got to it was being asked to **write** on the chalkboard 25 times things I would never do again. Those precious childhood memories.) Solomon wasn't just the bright kid in class, Solomon was essentially the valedictorian of the human race.

The Bible records this biographical description in *I Kings 4*:

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.

He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar . . . to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear . . . Solomon (I Kings 4:29-34).

Solomon is essentially the most brilliant man alive. Financially, royally, materially, intellectually – he had it all. He was king of the mountain.

Solomon adds this interesting phrase in his journal in *verse 17*:

And I applied my heart – that is, I dedicated my heart – ***to know wisdom and to know madness and folly*** (Ecclesiastes 1:17a).

The word 'wisdom' – *hochma* – is a broad term which refers to observing the intelligence, information, and scholarship of the world's wisdom. And not just the positive side of scholarship. Notice how Solomon couples it with the words ***madness and folly***. He'll do that three times in his journal. And when he does it,

he isn't contrasting the valedictorian of the graduating class with the guy who barely graduated; he's not comparing the guy who graduated summa cum laude to the guy who graduated with, "I just want to thank you Laude for getting me out of here." No, Solomon is using '*madness and folly*' to describe people who behave badly, wildly, irresponsibly, and sinfully.

You see, Solomon's not just touring the university library, he's touring the back alley. He is inspecting life from all the angles, from the morally upright to the morally uprooted who are without any moral compass or direction. Solomon is interviewing Supreme Court justices right along with death row inmates. He is studying the entire range of human behavior; he is examining the extremes, one author wrote, and everything in between.ⁱⁱⁱ

He is asking one basic question - do any of them on this spectrum between wisdom and madness have any kind of advantage over each other in chasing after meaning in life?

Solomon's conclusion is found in the last part of *verse 17*:

I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 1:17b).

There is that phrase again – *striving after* – or chasing after the wind.

Nobody has any advantage. Nobody can catch the wind. You think you have lasting happiness in life, but then it slips through your fingers.

I perceived means, 'I came to realize – I have come to know or understand'.

- He has come to realize that a Supreme Court Justice can be just as confused about the meaning of life as a death row inmate.
- He has come to realize that people who have it all and people who have lost it all are dead, even in the pursuit of happiness.
- He has come to realize that people earning doctoral degrees can be just as

unsatisfied as those who never made it out of kindergarten.

- He has come to realize that somebody living in an award-winning architectural marvel with a four car garage and another living in a mobile home with three cars out in the front yard that don't run can be equally unhappy.
- Solomon has come to realize that being king of the mountain doesn't bring him any more lasting joy than when he was clawing his way to the top.

Have you ever been at the top of the mountain? How long did the euphoria last? How long did it take before you wondered, 'Man, there's got to be something more'? Maybe it is that mountain over there? I'll try climbing that one. No, it's not that one either!

Ernest Hemmingway became a literary sensation in the last century, winning both the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Pulitzer Prize after producing novels which became best sellers.

Hemmingway was known as a 'man's man' who seemed to have life on a leash. He was seen as a courageous war correspondent, wounded war veteran, explorer and philosopher. He loved everything from big game hunting in Africa to bull fighting in Spain. He was wealthy, independent, and outspoken.

But before he took his life at the age of 61 he wrote these words, "Life is a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness."^{iv}

Sounds a lot like Solomon. It does not matter who you are or what you're doing if all you have is life here under the sun, because all you are going to catch is a fistful of wind. It is here, then it slips through your fingers and disappears into thin air.

Now keep in mind, God isn't a part of Solomon's quest. Solomon isn't praying.^v He isn't quoting the inspired words of Moses, and he certainly isn't being guided by the wisdom of God. He is being guided by the wisdom of man, the intuition and perception of a brilliant mind with street smarts and amazing observational and analytical skill.

Solomon arrives at another brutal truth about the dead-end of it all in *verse 18*:

For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

We can break this proverb down into two principles which are essentially parallel thoughts, just nuanced a little differently.

Principle #1:

No matter how much we know, there are frustrations we cannot solve.

In much wisdom is vexation. That Hebrew word for vexation can be translated ‘frustration or irritation’.^{vi} In other words, the more you know, the more frustrated you become. It’s true isn’t it – the more you learn the more you learn you need to learn? Or to put it another way, the more you know, the more you realize you don’t know.

This verse gives rise to that little axiom, “Ignorance is bliss.” The less you know, the less you have to worry about. The less you know the less you have to get angry and frustrated over.

Ignorance is bliss. It’s just better to not know so much!

Reminds me of a teacher who wrote on a boy’s report card before he headed home; the teacher wrote these words to his parents, “If ignorance is bliss, your son is going to be the happiest person in the world.”^{vii}

Now, Solomon isn’t disparaging education, learning, and science.^{viii} Solomon is simply arriving at the truth, which he will tie up at the end in *chapter 12*, that knowledge without God leads to frustration. The wisdom of the world is a dead-end. Becoming smarter is not the pathway to becoming happier.

Have you ever thought about the fact that *if* the solution to frustration was education, the happiest place on the planet would be a university campus? How’s that working out? If

that were true, the happiest people would be professors.

Plato was wrong. He believed perfection was possible through the educating of the human intellect or through human reason.^{ix} Somebody had already figured that Plato’s theory was incorrect 500 years earlier than Plato lived and had written his conclusion in his private journal. We have just read it – human reason doesn’t bring about perfection; in fact, Solomon wrote that it can’t even get rid of a little irritation.

How do you feel after church Sunday when that guy cuts in front of you in the church parking lot? You’ve just been to church which is about as perfect as you have been all week.

Beloved, the solution to dealing with the frustrations of life has never been information but transformation. And transformation, which begins at salvation, is the growing result of the Holy Spirit’s influence in your life, and the fruit of the Spirit’s result is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness . . . (*Galatians 5*).

Solomon writes with acid ink and brutal truth: no matter how much we know, there are problems, frustrations, and challenges we simply cannot solve.

In the face of that God-given reality, the Humanist Manifesto, Volume 2, declared when it was published in 1973, “Reason and intelligence are the most effective instruments humankind possesses . . . no deity will save us; we must save ourselves.”^x

There is a better solution – call upon the name of the Lord and you shall be saved (*Romans 10:13*).

Solomon adds a final phrase to his summary and complements the proverb in the latter part of *verse 18*.

And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (Ecclesiastes 1:18b).

Principle #2:

No matter how much we learn, there are sorrows we cannot avoid.

That is true. The more you learn, the more sorrow you end up with. You can now acquire news 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Your parents and grandparents would watch the news at night to find out what happened, and much of it had already been resolved by the time they watched it. Today, you can get updates every minute. You can learn about the latest terrorist attack anywhere in the world; you can keep up with every random shooting spree, every crime and misdemeanor, and all the sordid details in between.

The more you know the more you have now for which to be troubled, concerned, and burdened.

And on top of that, you live with yourself, and the longer life goes on the longer grows your list of regrets, misfortunes, troubles, and failures.

Some people desire to be king of the mountain, yet they never make it to the top. And they never get over that sorrow. However, the greater sorrow is found in the lives of those who made it to the top but discovered it wasn't what they thought it would be. It didn't give them what they thought they would get.

Many of you are old enough to have watched Cassius Clay in the sport of boxing. He changed his name to Muhammad Ali after he converted to Islam. He was the three-time World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, and his face graced the cover of Sports Illustrated more times than any other athlete in its history until Michael Jordan.

Gary Smith, a sportswriter, went to Ali's country estate to interview him a few years before Ali passed away. Gary was met at the door by a bent figure with slurred speech, a combination of Parkinson's disease and too many punches.

Eventually Ali walked Gary out to a barn that had become a museum filled with trophies and life-sized pictures of himself punching the air and holding championship belts over his head. Some of these large pictures which captured some of his greatest victories in the ring hung in plastic frames along one wall. As they walked

closer, they noticed white streaks on the pictures; pigeons nesting in the barn had soiled them with their droppings. Ali noticed them too and shuffled over and one by one turned them around to face the barn wall.

When he finished, he moved over to the open barn door where he gazed out over the countryside, muttering something under his breath.

Gary asked, "Excuse me? What did you say?"

Ali replied, "I was saying, 'I had the world, and it was nothin' . . . it was nothin' .'"

Sounds like Solomon, another man who had been king of the mountain. I had the world, but it slipped through my fingers and disappeared into thin air.

Without a Savior who reigns above the sun, without a Redeemer to lead you and forgive you and give you a future and a hope, you are left to yourself and your own resources to try to crawl up some mountain and find a moment of happiness.

If I were a reporter granted an interview with Solomon, I ponder what I might ask him. One question I would ask him would be, "Solomon, whatever happened to the music of your father, David? Solomon, you heard that music sung over and over again, for decades."

Do you remember them?

Your father's songs were learned the hard way. He reminded us:

- not to follow ourselves
- not to trust in human reason
- what matters in life is trust and in the wisdom and word of God

Like this Song of David:

To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in You I trust;
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
Teach me your paths.
On you I wait all day long;

Lead me in your truth and teach me,
For you are the God of my salvation.
(Edited from Psalm 25)

You can spend your life playing king of the mountain or trust the wisdom and leadership in worship, obedience, and trust offered to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
So sing that kind of song again . . . and again
. . . and again.

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i Quotes from several stelas and reliefs; Associates for Biblical Research, Bryant G. Woods, *Moses and Hatshepsut* (October 19, 2009)

ii Adapted from William D. Barrick, *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament* (Christian Focus, 2011), p. 43

iii David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Volume 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 65

iv Daniel L. Akin & Jonathan Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Ecclesiastes* (Holman, 2016), p. 16

v Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 43

vi Ibid

vii David Gibson, *Ecclesiastes: Living Life Backward* (Crossway, 2017), p. 39

viii John D. Currid, *Ecclesiastes: A Quest for Meaning?* (EP Books, 2016), p. 30

ix Currid, p. 29

x Currid, p. 29