



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 1:12 – 2:11

Lesson 2 of 16

2007-08

"Seek and Explore"

TRANSCRIPT

We are in the Book of Ecclesiastes, and tonight we're going to pick up from where we left off last week: Chapter 1 and beginning in Verse 12. We will look very much in detail at the end of this first chapter, because it lays out for us in a very logical order. I want to show you that it falls into two equal parts which tells us that our Teacher spent a great deal of time and effort in organizing his thoughts for the entire book. What you have in 1:12 is his introduction. Then in Verses 13 and 14 we have his personal reflections; followed by (vs15), a proverbial statement or saying. Next, in a perfect equal part, we go back to a personal reflection (vs 16&17); followed by a proverbial statement or saying (vs 18). Lastly, we will go on tonight and look at Chapter 2 and cover the first 11 verses. We'll read that text when we get to that particular section.

So let's begin our text tonight beginning in Chapter 1, Verse 12:

I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search and explore wisely all that is done under heaven. It's an evil task that God has given to the human race to keep them occupied. I observed all that is done under the sun and really it is all meaningless and a chasing of the wind.

(Now his proverbial statement or saying, Verse 15.) What is bent cannot be straightened; what is missing cannot be counted.

(And back to his personal reflection, Verse 16.) I said to myself, "I have surpassed in wisdom everyone who ruled Jerusalem before me; I have observed all forms of wisdom and knowledge. I devoted myself to understanding wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly. I understood that this is also a chasing of the wind."

(*And again, his proverbial statement.*) For with much wisdom comes much frustration; he who adds to knowledge adds to pain.
Ecclesiastes 1: 12-18

For the first time our speaker, our ‘Teacher’, is now speaking to us as his students. We immediately observe here the first person and that will continue all the way until we come to Chapter 12 verse 8 of this book. Let's just take a moment and look over there, Chapter 12 beginning in verse 8, just so you see the context of how this is all a first-person report. And here he is in 12:8 saying, "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. 'Everything is meaningless!'"

Then in verses 9&10, notice that we have a shift to the third person. This could be a teacher, our ‘Teacher’ describing himself, or his work being described by a scribe or a recorder who wrote what the Teacher said, or it could be a narrator. We're not sure. But let's notice verse 9. "Not only was the Teacher wise, but he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set out in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true."

So the vast majority of the book is tied to this first person account. That's important. Now back to our introduction, back to Chapter 1. And the first thing that we're greeted with here is a problem. Notice the past perfect, "*have been king*" (vs12). We would expect an English present tense here for a king who is still living. Now, after much discussion by a number of linguists, it has been determined that the verb here can have the force of 'have been and still is king'. I only bring this to your attention because in an exposition it is our responsibility never to gloss over problems but to address them and to try to the best of our ability to explain them. Here it is relevant to our presentation to tell you that the text has given a clear answer by the force of this verb, '*have been and still is*', and has not been amended.

Now another observation. Whereas our superscription at the beginning of last week's lesson, Verse 1, he referred to himself as “king in Jerusalem”, notice here (vs 12) it is “king over Israel”. Well, let's just think about that for a moment because that is a very important clue to our personality of the Teacher, Qoheleth.

Only King Solomon, after David, ruled over Israel from Jerusalem. Because upon his death, remember, the kingdom was divided under Rehoboam and Jeroboam: A kingdom to the south and a kingdom to the north.

Verse 13. ‘The man with the powerful mind’ and all his advantages, sets out in a personal reflection upon the world. With unlimited wealth and genius at his disposal, we would think that we will find a book, at this juncture, filled with much spiritual profit. Another Romans, if you can imagine, from the Old Testament. But alas, to our disappointment, the book is all about himself and his own experiences.

Look at the idiom, “*I devoted myself*”. This idiom occurs here and in Verse 17, Chapter 8 verse 9, and in that same chapter, verse 16. It means ‘*to set*’, ‘*to determine*’. It is used in Psalm 131:1, and we might translate this psalm this way: A Psalm of David, ‘My heart is not proud O, LORD, my eyes are not haughty, I have determined not to concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.’ The ‘*have determined*’ is the same verb used here in Ecclesiastes. And here is how that *determination* will be manifest.

He will, notice your text (Eccles 1:13), he ‘will search and explore’. The verb “to search” is used often in the Psalms, and translated, ‘*to seek*’. Psalm 119:10, “I *seek* you with all my heart;”. The second verb, “*to explore*,” is rather picturesque for us. Numbers 13:2, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Send out some men to (*and here’s our verb ‘explore’*) explore the land of Canaan...”

Next, you will notice that his study is comprehensive, “...all things done under heaven.” Now this tells us that he’s only looking at life in the *horizontal*. What his senses can tell him. What he can observe empirically on the Earth. So, you need to make this mental note: His study is very limited. And this is what is wrong with empiricism: We must have an infinite mind to determine if we have all the evidence regarding something.

For example, if I were to tell you that we could take white paint, and black paint, and mix them together, they would be gray. And I would say that with some certainty. But I can’t tell you that that is an absolute truth, because I don’t have all the data. Would that be true if it were 60 degrees below zero? Would it still be gray? If we took it

to 122 degrees Fahrenheit, would it still be gray? What if we took it to outer space and it is in its weightless condition? We just don't know all the variables. We just simply don't have all the data.

Now, what people do to try to prove the Scriptures empirically, they say, ‘Well, they're historically and geographically correct. Therefore, we deduce that all of their facts, the claims that the Bible makes about itself, must be correct as well.’ But again, we simply don't have all the data. And we never will have all the data to prove that the Bible is exactly correct; a truth. So we don't use empiricism. We go a different route altogether.

Our approach is not empirical. But we, by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that comes in outside of ourselves, (the new man, if you will), Who attests to us the accuracy and authority of the Bible, of the Scriptures, we say, "*Here is our first principle: The Bible is the Word of God.*" And we know that that is an absolute fact: Because the One who claimed it knows all the variables. He has all the data. He has an infinite mind. He knows everything. We just merely accept the claim that He makes about Himself.

Now that's a bit of a digression from our point in Ecclesiastes, but I think it's important to know that we don't have a blind faith. We have a reasonable faith. And the more empirical evidence that is gathered (for example, when they uncover some lost city that they didn't think ever existed, but the Bible records that it existed, and lo and behold, it turns out that it is in the exact locale that the Bible claimed it to be), well, that reinforces our faith. We don't say, "evidence demands a verdict." We say, "evidence confirms a verdict that the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit has already told us." The Bible is the Word of God. It is absolutely authoritative and factual. It is truth. Thy Word is truth.

Now our ‘man with the powerful mind’ gathers his information and comes to three conclusions. **First**, verse 13, upon his reflection he says, ‘What a grievous task has been laid upon (literally) the sons of Adam’. Our Teacher says there is something terribly wrong with reality here; this world we were born into. And why? Verse 14.

Because knowledge does not give us any contentment at all. It leaves us, he says, "chasing after the wind."

Now that's a difficult translation that finds a parallel in the Old Testament: Hosea 12:1, translated in your NIV, 'Ephraim feeds on an east wind.' The point of the phrase, (whether it's 'chasing', 'striving after', or 'feeding'), the point of our Teacher is that life on this Earth is a frustrating experience. And Verse 15, his **second** conclusion: It's frustrating because we're limited by the providence of God. Look at his proverbial statement to prove it, "What is bent" (or your NIV, 'twisted'), "cannot be straightened; what is missing cannot be counted." Now this is his observation concerning life on Earth. The word "bent" is a plural participle from the word "to make crooked." A very close parallel is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes 7:13, which makes God the bender. Look at 7:13, "Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what He has made crooked?"

Now you remember the woman's words to the LORD God in the garden? He said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" And she said, "The serpent deceived me and I ate." (Gen 3: 13). Reality, if you can believe this, but we believe it because the Bible says so, but reality at one time was perfect. Life was perfect. It was honest, and open, and straightforward. Now it's deceitful. That's what this life is, filled with deceit. It's bent. And man, for all of his efforts, can't get it "*straightened*". The verb here is only found in the Old Testament in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Literally, it means '*to become straight*'. It's found here in Verse 15 and in 7:13 and 12:9.

Now, we invent air conditioning. We discover penicillin. We discover electricity and make it profitable to us. Our lives become more comfortable as a result of our technological growth and discoveries. But in reality: We can't straighten life out—that's the point. The world is under judgment. This world is subject to futility. 'Look', the Teacher says, 'Something is missing and can't be counted. Something is wrong. It doesn't add up.'

So Verse 16, he reflects again. 'Look', he says, 'I'm the guy with the powerful mind and I can't understand this life, this world, this reality; and if I can't, then who can?!' Literally he said, '*I spoke with my mind*'. And although he had "an extra gear" above all

other people, when it came to ‘understanding’, he was just as lost as all those ‘other people’.

So, in verse 17 ‘he ran at it again’ with both wisdom and folly. Wisdom: Here we think of him contemplating something like Hoyle's Theories hunched over a manuscript late into the night. Or Folly: We think of him dancing in a San Francisco park at Haight and Ashbury circa 1967. But neither experience gave him what he was looking for. So his **third** conclusion: Experience gives no one insight. And his proverbial conclusion: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief".

So now, here in Chapter 2, he is going to plunge into a self-oriented quest for meaning. Let's notice:

I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter”, I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried to cheer 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.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all of this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all of my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.
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.

Very interesting. This young king becomes just like every other young man. His launching point to test life (Verse 1) is *pleasure*. Not the wise words of his sage father, ‘Above all else, my son, guard your heart’ (1 Kings 2: 4). “*Pleasure*” here is a general term for ‘the good life’. I think it's significant that laughter and joy can be used to hide grief and sorrow.

See Verse 2; he tries to laugh his way through life. But that was a waste. Proverbs 14:13, "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief." The point of the proverb and in the wisdom-literature is that oftentimes the fool is pictured laughing his way down the road to hell. Proverbs 10:23, "A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct...". Proverbs 26:18-19, "Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!'"

So then, he tries cheering himself with wine (vs3). The fine Lutheran expositor, H.C. Leuphold, saw this not as a young drunk having a good time but rather as a sophisticated connoisseur; and I think he argues that point rather well. Notice the phrase 'still guided by wisdom.' That would point to the fact that he was not intoxicated. The reason he found alcohol a big downer was due to timing. The pleasure that it brings doesn't last. This man was always acutely aware of time and that life had a very short distance (Notice the end of Verse 3, "...during the few days of their lives.>").

So, in verse 4, he moves from self-centered pleasure to grandiose achievements. Now, he will use that powerful mind for his great projects: houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, trees, irrigation. Many expositors have likened his industry to seeking to rebuild the garden that God had for man and the woman. And in seeing that he couldn't quite pull it off to perfection, he became depressed. But I think there's a more fundamental reason that it ultimately brought him no pleasure.

Look at the ethical datives right here in the text beginning in Verse 4, ‘houses *for myself*’. And not in the NIV, but in the original text, there is this same type refrain in verses 5&6: Construction ‘*for me*’. This wasn't philanthropy. This wasn't for the good of God's people. This was all ‘*for me*’. Verse 8. All this money, silver and gold. Now here in

the NIV, "...for myself."

Large property holdings require many servants whom he purchased. And acquired more to regale him, and a harem to please him. "*All for me.*" So from the human perspective, life 'under the sun', this man lived better and celebrated harder than anyone else. And he wants us to know, verse 10, that he exercised no restraint, no self-denial. Wine, women, song, planning, building, creating, anything his eyes desired, '*all for me*'.

"This," he said, "was the reward for all my toil." A most interesting statement. I would not expect him to say that. And we must do a little probing on that word '*reward*'. It literally means 'a share', 'a portion'. To own a publicly traded stock, we own a share or a portion of a company. So here-in lies an unseemly, significant tip as to this man's state of mind; this 'man with the powerful mind': Want to know why life became so sour for him? Verse 11, '...all the acts that my hands performed were so meaningless, trying to catch the wind.' Well the answer is: Life's rewards are not to be centered in yourself. The fact is, you and I were never designed to live our lives '*for ourselves*'. To concentrate all your gifts, all your powers, all your service, '*for yourself*' will ruin your existence—according to the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Christ came not only to save us from our sins, Christ came to save us from ourselves. "Let this mind," says the apostle, "be in you." (Philippians 2:5) And what is that mind, that mind of Jesus Christ, that is to be in us? Well, that mind of Christ made Himself of no value. That mind of Christ made Himself a servant. That mind of Christ carried out that servanthood for others all the way to the end, to die a very violent death on the cross for others. That's the mind that He exhibited: And the apostle said, 'That mind should be our mind.'

Look at this 'man with the powerful mind'; sullen, depressed, weak, weak-minded, seeking a reward for himself. That's what the fruit of living '*for me*' will do to you. Someone asked George Mueller what's the secret to his power in prayer? And his answer, "Dying to myself daily."

A formula for depression from the Book of Ecclesiastes? Live only for yourself. Do it all just '*for you*'. It's your reward, you know. Look at all that you've done and

achieved, all the odds that were against you: But you made it. You deserve it. That's what the commercials tell us, the billboards, the advertisers, 'Be good to yourself. You're worth it.' And if you go out and you believe that message and you live that way; well, you'll just fall in line with the world and they'll embrace you because you're just like them. That's what it's all about.

I've read the biographies of George Whitfield, John Calvin, John Knox..., and I wonder sometimes whether I'm really a Christian or not. So selfless were those men who gave themselves for others at all costs, at all times. As a seminary student, particularly at exam time, I can still remember driving over to Dr. Johnson's house, and I'd just be in my car sitting there looking at him in his study over his garage, and he had a window; and his back would fill that window. And I would just think about that. Here I am tired, worn out, getting ready for exams, and, look at him. Studying. Working hard.

When you took a course with S. Lewis Johnson, you got the best of courses because you got what he was thinking right then. His notes were the best. They were comprehensive because he never stopped being a student. A powerful mind? Now that was a man with a powerful mind. And you know what? He did it all for others. He did it all for the work of Christ. That's the way he lived his life.

A service for a kingdom that can never be touched, tasted, smelled, held onto. And the reason is because that kingdom is not 'under the heavens'. It's there, not here! And it will never be here for any of us. Today, we live by faith and we await that kingdom: And tomorrow we die, and we go into that kingdom. But living or dying, we live for that kingdom. That's our testimony. That's our life. That's what we are: Going about our master's business not for ourselves but for others.

My Christian friends, don't waste your life on yourself. It won't deliver. It was never designed to deliver. The creation has been subject to futility. Serve yourself? You will 'chase only the wind'. I don't offer you Ecclesiastes and I don't offer you 'the man with the powerful mind.' I offer you something far better with much more substance. I offer you Jesus the Christ. The Man who said, "Let him who comes after me deny

himself, take up his cross, and follow Me...”. ‘...for if any man,’ He said, ‘will lose his life, he’ll find his life. He’ll find it in losing it.’ (Matthew 16:24&25). I offer you that One: I offer you Christ Jesus. I offer you life eternal that far exceeds anything that we can have or think in this world under the heavens. A kingdom that will go on for all eternity. A Christ who sits in the center of that kingdom with a people that He chose for Himself that surround Him in worship and praise for His goodness, His grace, and His glory.

‘Years I spent in vanity and pride caring not my savior was crucified.’ That was us. But not anymore, not now. Not now; not tomorrow; not next week or next month. We’re a people chosen, redeemed, and made ready: Made ready for a life far beyond the best that this can offer. That’s where we’re going. That’s where we’re living: Beyond a ‘man with a powerful mind’.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your Word tonight. We're thankful that this Scripture, although written and inspired by such a weak individual, has profit for us. Because it's all for our correction, for our learning, for our growth, that we might be able and more well fit to live a life that's pleasing to You.

Father, I pray tonight for the list of people that have concerns. In prayer, we lift them up corporately together at this moment. We ask Your blessing upon them. We ask Your blessing upon this church, for the elders, the deacons, the teachers that You have given this place.

We pray that in all that we do, both now and forever, we would be faithful to You, and it is to that end and to that end only that we commit ourselves in prayer tonight, that Christ might be glorified, the First and the Last, the Alpha, the Omega, the Man with the greatest of all minds. Amen.

(End of Audio)