

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 25, 2024

Should I Quit School?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

With students returning to school here in our county tomorrow, doors open, literally and figuratively, for new opportunities in learning. Some will build on knowledge they've already acquired. Some will step into new subject areas they've never encountered or explored. But no matter whether the field of study is brand new or extremely familiar, students will arrive in their classrooms with a range of emotions. Excitement, anticipation, and eagerness, mixed with anxiety, worry, and fear. The prospect of acquiring more knowledge, and what that will require of them, generates a whole range of responses.

In today's text from Ecclesiastes, the writer has his own reaction to the experience of gaining knowledge and growing in wisdom. It has been decades since he first boarded the school bus to begin his journey of learning. By this point in his life, he has spent years and years in the quest for greater understanding, pursuing the deepest and most elusive subject of all, the knowledge of God. He spends a lot of his time in the assembly, giving instruction and sharing what he has learned with others. This is why he's often referred to as the "Teacher." That's the meaning of the Hebrew word from which we get the title of this book, Ecclesiastes.

Though he's the Teacher, the writer in today's text has also been a relentless student. He's a lifelong learner who has accumulated incredible amounts of knowledge, insight, and understanding. He says, "I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (v. 13a). Soon he adds, "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'" (v. 16). And yet, when we hear these statements within the context of Ecclesiastes as a whole, we may begin to wonder if the Teacher believes it's even worth continuing the pursuit of knowledge. In other words, when it comes to understanding the nature of life and the ways of God, maybe he should just give up and quit school.

After all, the Teacher does begin the entire book by saying, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" (1:2). Then, near the end, he repeats his frustration: "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" (12:8). So how did someone who's so ready to throw up his arms in despair get this many pages in Scripture? Who handed him the microphone? We come here on Sunday mornings to have our faith reinforced and strengthened. We gather here to receive encouragement and hope. But after hearing the Teacher, we may begin to wonder, Where's the hope in that? Where's the good news in that?

If that's what he thinks and how he feels, it's no wonder that the Teacher is considering dropping out of this school of theology. Maybe he would be better off pursuing another subject area, living in indifferent innocence to life's enduring and vexing questions. But the Teacher realizes, and acknowledges, that God "has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11). I like the way that J. I. Packer captures it when he says, "Deep down in every human heart, God has put

'eternity' (3:11)—a desire to know, as God knows, how everything fits in with everything else to produce lasting value, glory, and satisfaction. But the inquiry fails: It leaves behind only the frustration of having gotten nowhere."¹

That's the frustration we hear in today's text, which ends with the Teacher quoting with approval a proverb: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (v. 18). The Teacher keeps bumping up against the limits of human knowledge and understanding, no matter which areas of life he searches. He observes and analyzes all kinds of human activity. Hard work and labor. Self-indulgence and pleasure. The pursuit of peace and justice. Social advancement. Making money and accumulating assets. Even the quest for wisdom, religious understanding. And yet in each and every case, "all things that are done under the sun" (v. 14), the Teacher ends up concluding that they're "meaningless." The Hebrew term, which appears over and over in Ecclesiastes, literally means "vapor" or "fog." It's similar to that kind of water vapor you breathe out on a cold day. It appears, then quickly disappears. The word conveys the sense of emptiness, pointlessness. To the Teacher, all of human life looks and feels that way. It's all fleeting and futile.

But before we give up on the Teacher, we need to note that the second half of Ecclesiastes opens up possibilities for continuing the search for wisdom and understanding. Though it may look like the Teacher is ready to quit the school of wisdom and find other quests in life, he still meanders around in a way that indicates that pursuing and practicing wisdom is still worthwhile. In chapter nine (vv. 13-18), he even recalls an incident in which there was a struggle between a powerful king and a small city. In the city lived a poor but wise man whose wisdom helped save the city. Though by outward circumstances the poor man appeared insignificant, and following his death he was easily forgotten, his wisdom was greater than the world's forms of power. The conclusion? Don't abandon the call to wisdom, but persevere in pursuing it, and leave the outcome to God.

Remember that we are mortal beings living in the presence of an eternal God. There are boundaries to our perception and our comprehension. As James K. A. Smith summarizes it, "Even with eternity in our hearts, we are temporal creatures inhabiting this mortal vale. The past and future are limited at our horizons. We will never see the whole; we will never have God's scope of perspective."² But this doesn't mean that we turn in our textbooks, empty out our lockers, and leave behind the pursuit of the knowledge of God. When we open the Scriptures, they continually and confidently declare that this is the primary knowledge we're called to seek.

In an interview with NPR during his 2018 farewell tour, musician/songwriter Paul Simon commented on the great mysteries of life. He said:

We don't have the capacity to understand the great mysteries of life and God or no God or infinity, we just can't get it. It's beyond us, but that's fine. We're not meant to get that. But the pursuit is so interesting. That, I think, it's life sustaining and I think when you lose the interest in that pursuit you're finished.³

Your presence in this worship gathering is a form of pressing on and pushing on in pursuing the knowledge of God. Especially through our church's ministry of preaching and teaching, you continue to grow in listening to and learning the word of God for your life. We often speak of ourselves as disciples of Jesus. A disciple is essentially a learner, a student of our Lord, engaged in the lifelong process of seeking the kingdom of God and advancing in the wisdom of a life shaped by the reality of the kingdom. As I've noted before, in the life of the church we have year-round school. Our primary curriculum, the knowledge of God and his reign, is always in session. So here today, we're continuing to pursue wisdom.

Wisdom is more than just the accumulation of knowledge and experience. James Billington is the Librarian of Congress Emeritus. The Library of Congress was established in 1800. In 1815, the Library accepted 6,487 books from the library of Thomas Jefferson. Around a decade ago, the Library of Congress had a collection of more than 155 million items, which included more than 35 million cataloged books and other print materials in 470 languages and nearly 120 million additional items in various formats. I'm not sure what the numbers are now. And yet, in the midst of managing this enormous collection, Billington stressed that it's even more difficult for our nation to know what to do with all of this information. In fact, Billington described the contemporary world as "an info-glut culture." So he asked a probing question: "But have we become any wiser?"⁴

The knowledge of God, the greatest form of wisdom, means more than just adding to your mental library of theological concepts. It means more than just accumulating data about our religious teachings and traditions. It means more than just storing up more information about the Bible. It means more than just my delivering sermons that get the right ideas about God into your head. True, opening up the Scriptures and studying them, personally, in small groups, and in the context of weekly congregational worship, is critical and necessary. But our aim goes beyond just growing our knowledge base of the word. Wisdom, in its deepest sense, means embodying and practicing the word of God that we hear as he speaks into our lives.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "Never try to explain God until you have obeyed Him. The only bit of God we understand is the bit we have obeyed."⁵ In the biblical understanding of wisdom, knowledge is inseparable from obedience. To truly know God involves doing the will of God as revealed in his word. So here in the life of God's people, the knowledge that we're after isn't just the theoretical knowing about, but the practical knowing how.

The wisdom that's passed on to us through the book of Ecclesiastes is primarily about the business of living. For all his talk about studying, exploring, searching, and understanding, the Teacher's main topic is how to inhabit, and what to do, with this fleeting thing called life. This is why, at several points, the Teacher instructs us to focus on the good gifts of God that are present, day by day, moment by moment, in the precariousness of life (2:24; 8:15; 9:9). Gifts like relationships, work, play, health, eating, and drinking. The ordinary activities and experiences that hold such potential for joy. These all come from a God whose work and ways are beyond our understanding, but who's still in control.

At the end of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher says, "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. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14). Yes, life is full of enigmas that we can't solve. The world is full of suffering and injustice that are beyond our capacity to set right. Our lives are broken in ways that we ourselves can't repair. And in the midst of it all, God is often inscrutable, and life remains vaporous. But the promise of God's presence, and the hope of Christ, are solid and lasting. The light we've been given in him confirms that the pursuit of knowledge, the search for wisdom, is worth it. So when it comes to the knowledge of God, we're not going to quit school. We're going to continue to apply ourselves to the study of the word of God and to trusting and obeying what he teaches us.

¹ J. I. Packer, "How I Learned to Live Joyfully." Christianity Today. September 9, 2015. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/september/ji-packer-how-i-learned-to-live-joyfully.html> (August 21, 2024).

² James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022) 22.

³ Bob Boilen, "Paul Simon Says 'I'm Finished' Writing Music. NPR. September 5, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2018/09/05/644544793/paul-simon-says-im-finished-writing-music> (August 21, 2024).

⁴ Adapted from Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014) n.p.

⁵ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 11.