

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility**

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

### **The Dead End Road of Wisdom**

(selected passages from Ecclesiastes)

Study #3

#### **Introduction: Wisdom from Banaland...**

For nearly forty years,<sup>1</sup> Steve Martin has played the zany comic in movies, stand-up acts, and in the early days of Saturday Night Live.

Especially near the beginning of his career, he was the King of Banaland. Martin was a “wild and crazy guy” in the tailored white suit who sang about King Tut, wore an arrow on his head, and urged us to be obsequious, purple, clairvoyant and omnipresent.<sup>2</sup>

In one of his early songs, he belted out these lyrics:

*“We’re having some fun.*

*We’ve got music and laughter and wonderful times.*

*We’re having some fun.*

*That’s so important in today’s world, of yeah -  
it’s so hard to laugh...”*

No doubt about it. Martin knows comedy - and the last line of that silly tune tells us something else that Steve Martin knows.

It’s not common knowledge that he began college aiming at a major in philosophy at Cal State Long Beach.

He started off with metaphysics and from there moved through advanced logic, existentialism, and logical positivism, ending with the semantic puzzles of Wittgenstein.

Speaking of that season of life, Steve Martin wrote,

*“I remember sitting in a Laundromat with friends and we finally figured everything out. Everything became pure semantics, nothing had meaning. It was like losing your mind. We could no longer talk to each other and we just started laughing. At that point it was over for me in philosophy.”*

He quit college shortly after that experience and shifted from the pursuit of philosophy (wisdom) to a career in comedy.

He succeeded brilliantly, of course, but with a special kind of laugh. Steve Martin’s laugh is an empty guffaw, a giddiness, and a silliness. Happy feet dancing crazily on the precipice of nothingness.

Many centuries before Steve Martin, another man asked the same types of questions about life’s meaning and purpose.

The ancient Jewish King Solomon was also a seeker after wisdom. In many ways, Solomon’s conclusions about wisdom took him to a very Steve Martin-ish kind of place.

We’ll start off listening as Solomon extols some of wisdom’s benefits. He mentions three things that wisdom accomplishes, demonstrating its worth. First off, wisdom provides protection.

#### **The Pursuit of Wisdom**

##### **Wisdom’s True Value**

*What does wisdom do?*

Wisdom protects

Remember, according to the Jewish way of thinking, wisdom equates to “skill in living.” It is the commodity that enables someone to get along in life.

<sup>1</sup> Martin won an Emmy in 1969 for writing comedy for the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour.

<sup>2</sup> From “Grandmother’s Song”

Solomon says -

***[7:12] For wisdom is protection just as money is protection, But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.***

and

***[7:19] Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.***

Now, if times get tough, I wouldn't mind having either unlimited resources of money OR ten rulers at my back. But Solomon says that if you're looking for protection, wisdom trumps both money and military might.

If you've got wisdom, you can often figure a way out of a problem. Better yet, if you've got wisdom, you can often avoid getting into trouble in the first place!

Second, wisdom brings success.

#### Wisdom brings success

***[10:10] If the axe is dull and he does not sharpen its edge, then he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of giving success.***

Just as sharpening an axe makes a job easier, wisdom gives success in life. Wisdom is "axe-sharpening."

A wise mechanic is a superior mechanic; a wise surgeon is a better surgeon; a wise computer programmer has a leg up on the competition. A wise student is a conscientious, responsible, productive student.

Third, wisdom influences others for good.

#### Wisdom influences others for good

***[12:11] The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd.***

I like Solomon's imagery. He mentions "goads." Think cattle prod. He speaks carpentry. The wood-worker sets the nail, takes aim, and

hammers it into the wood. The strike hits the mark and drives the nail deep into the wood.

Like a boat on a lake, the words that wise people speak leave a wake behind them. Their words have good effect. The words of the wise don't just sit there. They resonate with the listener and DO SOMETHING.

If you've been around wise people, you know what I'm talking about. The wise woman's words are appropriate and beautiful, like apples of gold in settings of silver (Proverbs 25:11). The wise man's words are powerful.

No doubt about it. Possessing wisdom gives tremendous advantage in life! Like light in the physical world, wisdom is a valuable commodity in the moral world.

#### *The excellent essence of wisdom*

"Light" is a common symbol in the Bible for wisdom - and we can see why.

In the physical world, light gives direction. Light illumines a path. Light dispels the darkness. Light produces energy.

And these are exactly the kinds of things that wisdom does in the moral realm. The wise man knows what he is about. The wise woman knows where she is going.

Wisdom is worth pursuing. It is vital to a vibrant life. One of the greatest things that you can say about anybody is - "*She is a wise woman; he is a wise man.*"

When King Solomon was a young man, he saw wisdom's benefits and determined that he would become a wise man. So, he set out to acquire wisdom.

#### **Solomon's Wisdom**

***[1:13] and I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.***

He didn't want to gain a little wisdom. He wanted to have encyclopedic knowledge and to figure out how life worked.

The two words he uses here "seek"<sup>3</sup> and "explore"<sup>4</sup> are the words a Jew would use to describe intensive, extensive research into a topic. They picture a man giving himself to something wholeheartedly.

When I picture someone seeking and exploring, I see a physician straining at her microscope as she tries to find a cure for a dread disease, working night and day to save patients.

I see an athlete training day in and day out preparing for the Beijing Olympics this summer.

THAT is how Solomon pursued wisdom! He gave himself wholeheartedly to gaining wisdom.

And I find this interesting...

Despite the fact that God gifted him with the capacity for assimilating information and exercising judgment, he didn't become wise by osmosis (the dream of every student!).

It required diligent effort, seeking, exploring, studying, and thinking. As it is for you and for me, Solomon still had to get wisdom the old-fashioned way: he earned it!

And the result of his searching, seeking, and exploring was that he did, in fact, by any human standards, become wise.

He knew all about natural sciences. Accomplished in the fine arts, he was an excellent musician and a skilled poet. He mastered law. He was an architectural and engineering genius.

His wisdom was unsurpassed "under the sun."

Here's his own assessment<sup>5</sup>: *[1:16] I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge."*

BUT, even solomonic wisdom is not a panacea for human confusion. Wisdom - as great as it is, and as Solomon speaks about it here in Ecclesiastes - doesn't provide ultimate satisfaction for our deepest hunger for meaning.

For instance, he cites the situation of a city that was saved by one man's wisdom. The story highlights a couple of the potential downsides to wisdom.

### The Inadequacy of Wisdom

*Wisdom - valuable, but vulnerable (9:14-18)*

*[9:14] there was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siege works against it. [15] But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.<sup>6</sup> [16] So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. [17] The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. [18] Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.*

Solomon is impressed with this little story, and we might imagine that there is a moral to it. But, this little tale is not a parable to show what people should do. It is a cautionary tale to show what people are like.

The story does show that wisdom is better than military strength - and therefore valuable.

BUT, the story also drives home the point that in this world, the credit for victory will often go to the loud mouth, not to the wise man who deserves the credit.

<sup>5</sup> He clearly had no trouble with low self-esteem!

<sup>6</sup> There is no clear historical reference to which Solomon may be referring here.

<sup>3</sup> The first word is the Hebrew *darash* - to seek, as in seeking God with one's whole heart - to care for (seek someone's best interest)

<sup>4</sup> The second is *tur*. It means to explore and implies an intense searching out. It is the word used to describe the spying out of the land of Canaan by the spies before they crossed the Jordan River and conquered. It denotes careful examination.

Wisdom often goes unheeded - especially when it comes from someone low on an organization's hierarchy. Sometimes, even when it is available, wisdom is not put to use.

So, Solomon's question is, "*If wisdom is not respected, and just sits there at crucial times, or if it is not appreciated when it is given, why bother attaining it?*"

While wisdom is valuable, it is also vulnerable to abuse and to underuse.

Good story. An honest assessment of a situation where the wise man got the short end of the stick. And Solomon's not finished, either.

Throughout Ecclesiastes, he surprises us with some pretty strong language - and we can't argue with his conclusions.

Our experience bears out the truth of what he says. Listen to a couple more negative bits of wisdom about wisdom from wise old Solomon.

*Wisdom - and ruin (7:16)*

***[7:16] Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?***

Do you want a happy, carefree life? Then, for heaven's sake don't pursue wisdom!

Don't find out about endangered species  
corruption in government  
the problem of prison overcrowding  
the dangers of toxic waste  
the ingredients in that hotdog  
the realities of abortion  
the messes created by Democrats AND the messes created by Republicans  
the plight of our suffering brothers and sisters in Christ around the world  
the suffering of the AIDS patient or the plight of the whole sub-continent of Africa due to AIDS, epidemic and war  
the real status of the Social Security "trust" fund - you get the idea.

Gaining wisdom, insight, and knowledge will only increase your pain. Learning more and more about more and more is only to be exposed to more and more hurt, pain, and ugliness.

OK, so wisdom doesn't make life easier. But surely wisdom pays off in the long run, right?

Not so fast. Solomon wants to ensure that we aren't deceived in this, either.

In the long run (especially thinking of "the long run" in a particular way) there's no special payoff for the wise guy.

*Wisdom - and ~~taxes and~~ death (2:14-15)*

***[2:14] The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. [15] Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity."***

Some years ago, when I did a lot of running, I had a friend who didn't exercise. He told me that his theory was that we are all allotted a finite number of heartbeats in life.

If you exercise, you use up your heartbeats faster. He chose to not exercise so as to live longer.

That's one way to look at it.

You can make all kinds of lifestyle choices, wise or not. You can get fit with strenuous or moderate exercise, or you can live the sedentary life of the happy couch potato.

You can survive on a diet of junk and fast food, or you can eat healthy and take vitamin supplements.

You can look both ways before crossing the street, visit the dentist regularly, have an annual physical check-up - or not.

There is no doubt which is the wisest course to follow, but the final verdict is the same: wise living and foolish living both put you in the grave.

Nobody - not even the wisest among us - gets out of this world alive!

Taking the “long view” (say, one hundred years out), what benefits do those healthy, cautious lifestyle choice bring? Not much. Both the wise and the foolish die!

Because of this frustrating reality - that the benefits of wisdom seem to be equaled by the downsides - Solomon says, *[2:17] Everything is futility and striving after wind.*

Near the beginning of the book, he lamented how frustrating it is to figure out that we long to figure life out and then to have to figure out that, EVEN WITH WISDOM, life can't be figured out!

Going one step further, Solomon says, *[2:17] So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.*

So, if wisdom doesn't hold the answer to establishing life as a meaningful experience - why not chuck wisdom, and pursue its opposite?

Evidently, that was what Solomon thought. To the suggestion that he pursue folly Solomon said, “OK!” He ran with the idea of running away from wisdom and ran straight to folly.

Having given himself to study and research and diligent observation, he tried adopting the stance of the ostrich, and stuck his brilliant head in the sand.

### The Pursuit of Folly (the way of the ostrich)

#### Understanding “Folly”

In our world, “folly” may imply silliness. In the Bible, “folly” means something else. It speaks of a lack in morals, in spiritual sense, and in life direction.

The fool doesn't give God His due. Folly is acting rashly out of fear, rather than wisely out of faith. Folly is practical atheism, living as if God was not.

*As illustrated by King Saul -*

For instance, King Saul (two generations prior to Solomon) pursued folly. He sinned against God in a number of ways, and then consulted a medium. That was foolish.

*As illustrated by King Solomon -*

Solomon pursued folly when he engaged in immorality, became a gross materialist and worshiped other gods.

Not satisfied with the meaning he was finding in sound wisdom, he rushed headlong into a flight from rationality.

And the pursuit of folly is alive and well in 2008, too!

*As illustrated by people in 2008 (Others? Me?, You?)*

The cult of the irrational is seen the mad rush toward **romance** (via books, Internet, movies, TV), **escape** (chemical addictions, gaming, extreme experiences) and **nihilism** (the obscene, ugly, absurd, perverse).

As many people are discovering in our own day, Solomon found that as inadequate as wisdom may be, folly doesn't work, either.<sup>7</sup> Listen to what he has to say about folly.

### The End Result of the Pursuit of Folly

*[7:6] For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,  
So is the laughter of the fool;  
And this too is futility.*

That proverb brings to mind a Steve Martin laugh. Silly. Empty.

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<sup>7</sup> Solomon makes the observation that a fool and a wise man will take different life directions. The fool's way leads to death - 10:2. (symbolized by “left”)

Then we have this description of the way of folly:

*[10:12] Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; [13] the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. [14] Yet the fool multiplies words. No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him? [15] The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.<sup>8</sup>*

Oh the fool makes excellent progress, all right - on his march to futility! He's making great time on his way to nowhere and would get lost on an escalator!

So, at the end of the day, Solomon has left us with this: Wisdom leaves questions unanswered that we really want dealt with. But folly leaves us even more unfulfilled. What are we to do?

And here's where we look for the nice neat ending, some way to tie our confusion up with a bow.

Give us a hand, Solomon! Help us come up with a way to understand life, a grand unifying theory that will explain everything!

### **The Resolution...**

#### **Searching for the Grand Unifying Principle of Life...**

The Holy Grail of modern science is the search for a so-called "Grand Unifying Theory" or a "Grand Unifying Principle", a set of scientific truths that will explain everything in the physical universe.

Scientists are throwing Einstein out with the bathwater and re-envisioning the way the world works, as they take into consideration quantum theory, chaos theory, black holes, geons, quantum foam, and other even more esoteric offshoots of physics.

In the same way that scientists are seeking a Grand Unifying Theory of the physical universe, Solomon was seeking a Grand Unifying

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<sup>8</sup> See [10:1] *Dead flies make a perfumer's oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.* Also [10:3] *Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool.*

Theory of life, a way to understand life so that it all fits and it all makes sense.

He was trying to get it all worked out, using his great intellect, as he says over and over again, "*under the sun.*" That's an important phrase in Ecclesiastes.

Life "*under the sun*" is a technical term referring to life without regard for God.

For long seasons of his life, Solomon was trying to figure out life independent of God. And during those seasons when he was attempting to find that Grand Unifying Principle of life, he kept running into the brick wall of vanity. Life continued to be un-figure-out-able.

So that's it! We finally get it. "*That was Solomon's problem. That's why life didn't make sense to him. He wasn't a Christian. More appropriately - since he lived centuries before Jesus - Solomon didn't know God.*"

And by saying that, our point would be that when someone knows God, life makes sense, the pieces fit together, the perplexing questions are answered and the vexing problems are all resolved. Right?

Not so fast...

Ecclesiastes may be a hard book, but it is above all things, an honest book.

And as we try to get a handle on what Solomon DOES say about the source of meaning and purpose in life, we had better notice the advice he does NOT give.

#### **The Answer That Solomon Does NOT Give**

He never says, "*Become a Christian* (or, for his pre-Christian time, convert to Judaism) *and all your questions will be answered.*"  
OR "*Do you want to figure it all out, understand all mysteries, learn the whys and the wherefores and the hows of creation, human behavior, and nature? Then believe in God.*"

Solomon didn't say these things and we had better not say them either.

Believers don't have crystal balls that allow us insights into the confounding "*Whys*" of life that others don't have!

At the same time, our friend Solomon does assure us that there IS hope for finding meaning and purpose in life on earth.

### **Conclusion: The End of the Quest - NOT a "what" but a "Who"**

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon consistently tells us what is good in life. Not good "under the sun," but REALLY good. Good in the sight of God.

And always what is TRULY good in life is linked to relationship. Always.

He tells us, "*If you really want meaning and purpose to fill your days, take your eyes off of the 'what' and the 'why' and place them on the 'who'.*"

*The purpose-full life is the people-full life*

There are lots of great comments in Ecclesiastes extolling the virtues of friendships and intimate human relationships.

Wrestling with philosophical conundrums can be fun. But there's nothing like the anticipation of spending time with friends to press meaning into a day.

Involve yourself with great books, sure. More importantly, involve yourself with great people.

If you're married, love on your husband. Love on your wife. It's good to do that. If you're living with or in close proximity to children - of whatever age - invest heavily in them.

God created us with a need for relational connection, and when we give ourselves to establishing those relational ties, the sense of

meaninglessness and purposelessness that can so easily haunt us begins to dissipate.

But great relationships with friends and loved ones is still not the final answer.

Solomon's bottom line is that ultimate meaning in life is found in a trusting, reverent relationship with an eternal, transcendent God.

*The purpose-full life is the God-filled life*

As Saint Augustine said sixteen hundred years ago at the beginning of his Confessions, "*O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.*"

Understanding why what happens happens will often not be possible in this life. Knowing Who has created all that is possible.

And the believer lives with the tension that his/her most pressing questions may well not be answered, at least not here.

But knowing God through faith in Christ gives that believer the courage to say, "*Life can't be figured out - and I'm OK with that because I know the One who made life, and I trust Him.*"

In the moral and spiritual realm, there is not a Grand Unifying Principle. There is, instead, a Grand Unifying PERSON.

Solomon would tell us that those seeking meaning and fulfillment in life "under the sun" will be chronically frustrated.

Meaning and purpose are found when we seek the Author of life Himself.

Ecclesiastes assures us that life "under the sun" holds no ultimate meaning. The New Testament assures that life "under the Son" (Jesus!) is filled with meaning.

Once, Jesus was speaking to people about just what we are talking about today: the prospects of finding a fulfilling life.

He admitted that there were lots of imposters, posers, pretenders, who claimed to bring life, but only brought emptiness. **[John 10:10a] *The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy.***

Then Jesus made His great claim. Listen carefully, *“I came that they might have knowledge and have it abundantly!” “I came that they might figure out life and figure it out completely! “I came that they might have answers, and have them encyclopedically!” NOT!*

Jesus said, **[John 10:10] *“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came that they might have LIFE, and have it abundantly.”***

As valuable as wisdom is, what you’re looking for is Jesus.