**Vain Pursuits**

Nearly 3,000 years ago, a man conducted a series of social experiments to determine the key to a meaningful and fulfilled life. This man was uniquely qualified for such a study. His impressive knowledge and wisdom were widely acknowledged and appreciated. His financial resources were virtually unlimited. He was in the perfect position to test each hypothesis fully before eliminating it from consideration.

King Solomon used himself as a test subject. Self-experimentation can be a dangerous undertaking. In this case, Solomon embarked on a number of extreme lifestyles, some of which could prove to be self-destructive. The old adage, “Don’t try this at home” applies to Solomon’s exploits. In fact, it is clear that some of his choices eventually led to his personal and spiritual downfall and resulted in his kingdom being torn in two. But we can read the book of Ecclesiastes and learn from Solomon’s work. Only a fool ignores the failings of others and insists on making all of his own mistakes for himself.

Solomon set out to test four avenues of human endeavor to which many folks devote their lives in pursuit of fulfillment: wisdom, pleasure, wealth and work. Some people are defined by their advanced educational credentials and intellect. Others seem intent on filling their lives with endless distractions and self-indulgence. Still others are preoccupied with money; poor people buying lottery tickets, rich people engaging in unscrupulous practices, middle-class folks working long hours for a chance at financial independence. Finally, there are people who are consumed with the desire to accomplish works of enduring importance.

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with wisdom, pleasure, money or work. In fact, all of these dimensions of the human experience have their place in a meaningful life. The question Solomon set out to answer was, which, if any of these, is the key to joy and fulfillment, and his emphatic conclusion was, *none of the above.*

Solomon had been granted wisdom by God, but he also actively pursued the deepest possible understanding of the natural world around him. He withheld nothing from himself that would bring him pleasure including the company of hundreds of women. His wealth was legendary in his own time. He built palaces and cities and an army equipped with the latest technology. Alas when Solomon had exhausted all possibilities in each of these areas, he reached the same conclusion: All is vanity. In some cases, everything was never enough. In others he was simply left feeling empty. Attributes like great wisdom actually carried greater concern, stress and responsibility.

So what did Solomon learn from his experiences? “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

When a person devotes himself wholly to serving his creator, he seeks to be governed by divine wisdom. The pleasures in his life are regulated by God’s wishes. He views material things as blessings from God and seeks to use them in service to others. He works heartily to bring glory to God and to provide for his family. In all things he puts his complete trust in God and in so doing, he enjoys a peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:6-7).

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