

Choices!
2 Chronicles 1:7-13
Ecclesiastes: A Philosophical Autobiography

Every day, you and I make dozens, if not hundreds of choices.

When to get up

What to wear

What to eat for breakfast (or skip it)

How we greet people we meet, be they strangers, acquaintances, family, colleagues.

And the list goes on and on...

Of course, many if not most of our choices are of minor significance, but some may be life-altering.

I remember as a young person riding my NZeta scooter to theological college in Remuera. Coming up to some traffic lights, they just turned yellow and I momentarily thought of riding on through but decided it better to stop. Good choice! A car coming from the opposite direction sped through the intersection and turned right in front of me. Had I gone through, he probably would have collided with me. Right then and there I thanked God for what I believe was His prompting to stop. I chose to respond to His warning.

Albert Camus said, "Life is a sum of all your choices."

Today, I would like to take you on a journey through the life of a person who made some choices that have much to teach us.

Solomon, King David's son, had only just been anointed as King over Israel. Solomon gathered together the commanders, judges and leaders of Israel for a special assembly and offered sacrifices to the Lord.

Then, that night, Solomon was presented with an opportunity to make a life-altering choice.

So reading from 2 Chronicles 1:7-13

7 That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.'

Wow! – God has spoken! What would you choose???

Take a minute to tell your neighbour what you would ask of God if He said to you *'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.'*

8 Solomon answered God, 'You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. 9 Now, Lord God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. 10 Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?'

11 God said to Solomon, 'Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honour, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, 12 therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, possessions and honour, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.'

13 Then Solomon went to Jerusalem from the high place at Gibeon, from before the tent of meeting. And he reigned over Israel.

In 1 Kings 4:29-34 we read of Solomon's wisdom:

29 God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. 30 Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite – wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. 32 He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 33 He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. 34 From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

Out of all the possibilities, Solomon chose WISDOM.

At this point I would like to take you to the book of Ecclesiastes. No-where in this book are we told directly who the author is.

If you look at the beginning of [Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:17](#), you will see that the author excelled in wisdom and in greatness. He was able to accomplish whatever he wanted and to enjoy all the pleasures that came with royalty.

[Ecclesiastes 12:9-10](#) (NIV) says:

9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

Considering all the details supplied in Ecclesiastes, there is only one son of David that fits as the author of this book: King Solomon.

As I have read Ecclesiastes, it has struck me as a "Philosophical Autobiography" – the story of a man who chose over and over again to "push the envelope" of what a person could experience in life. And, in addition to his own choices, he looks at the life-choices others make, and comments on those choices.

So Ecclesiastes is a collection of accounts about the Teacher's own choices, and also his observations of the choices of both rich and poor, powerful people and nobodies.

It is both interesting and compelling that each time Solomon sums up his own experiences and those of others with these, or similar words:

'Meaningless! Meaningless!'

says the Teacher.

'Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.' (Eccl 1:2)

And in Eccl 2:26, 4:16 he says:

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Chasing after status, money, sex, pleasure, control, possessions, knowledge and even wisdom itself are all an attempt, the Teacher says, to grasp what we cannot hold.

The Hebrew word translated as "meaningless" in the NIV, or "vanity" in the NASB & KJV is the word *havel*, which doesn't have an exact equivalent in English.

The Hebrew word *havel* literally means "vapour, breath, or wind". Think of a mere puff of air or the vapour on a cup of coffee. That's *havel*. *Havel* refers to something insubstantial that you cannot grasp or hold onto. Figuratively speaking, *havel* refers to something that is empty of genuine gain, or something that is fleeting and doesn't last or is difficult to wrap your mind around; something ephemeral.

An example of *havel* is [Proverbs 31:30](#) which says: *Charm is deceitful and beauty is havel*. That's not to say that beauty is worthless or evil, but that it is insubstantial. You see it and then it's gone.

In the Old Testament, idols are often referred to as *havel*. They are emptiness and totally useless.

So what did the Teacher try? What choices did he make? And, in addition, what did he observe others trying?

Outlining Ecclesiastes is challenging because the Teacher repeats and overlaps themes. His case against pursuing things such as wealth, pleasure, and success, as a means of satisfaction is not neatly set out. A number of themes are mentioned in multiple places. And this is typical of Hebrew poetry: a topic is mentioned and then a little later reiterated, reinforcing the idea from another angle. In Ecclesiastes, it is not so much that the Teacher circles back to a previous topic, but that he is spiralling around and up until, at the end, he reveals the one thing that has lasting relevance.

Rather than going round and round with the recurring themes, I will just touch on each new point that the Teacher raises.

First, the Teacher illustrates life's meaninglessness.

Ecclesiastes 1:3-8

3 What does a man get for all his work which he does under the sun? 4 People die and people are born, but the earth stays forever. 5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and travels in a hurry to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. It goes around and around, and returns again on its way. 7 All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. And they return again to the place from which the rivers flow. 8 All things are tiring. Man is not able to tell about them. The eye never has enough to see, and the ear is never filled with what it hears.

Basically, what he is saying is that since life is futile, how can it be worth living?

Next he chooses to explore the value of wisdom. Surely this is something worth having!

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are havel - meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. 18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

So the Teacher concludes that wisdom alone is not satisfying, there is still an emptiness in one's soul.

Next, the Teacher chooses to experiment with pleasure in various ways.

In Eccl 2:1-2 we read that he tries to have fun and engage in frivolity and laughter.

Then, in Eccl 2:3 we read that he chooses to indulge in wine.

Next he experiments with grand projects, making gardens and pools of water; acquiring many slaves flocks and cattle. He accumulates land, gold and silver. He takes many wives.

Eccl 2:10-11 says:

10 Whatever my eyes wanted I did not keep away from them. I did not keep my heart from anything that was pleasing, for my heart was pleased with all my work. This was my reward for all my work. 11 Then I thought about all that my hands had done, and the work I had done. I saw that it was all for nothing. It was like trying to catch the wind, and there was nothing to get for it under the sun.

The Teacher found that searching after fame, pleasure, and achievement brings no ultimate meaning.

Cameron Diaz: “If you are looking for fame to define you, then you will never be happy. You will always be searching for happiness. You will never find it in fame.”

Jim Carey: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer.”

Next the Teacher chooses hard work and finds that this too is *havel* – hollow, no ultimate meaning.

Eccl 2:21-23

21 For a person may labour with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. 22 What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun? 23 All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

Then, in Eccl 3:9-12 he goes on to say:

*9 What do workers gain from their toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. **He has also set eternity in the human heart**; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.*

In essence, the Teacher is saying that the happiness one finds in being busy and productive, and in doing good, ultimately does not satisfy our longing for **eternal significance** – **God has set eternity in the human heart**.

In the first part of Ecclesiastes 5 the Teacher admonishes us to choose our words carefully, especially when we make a vow or promise to God.

Eccl 5:2

*Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.*

And from this the Teacher goes on to tell us that searching after money and power brings no ultimate meaning.

Eccl 5:15

*Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.
They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands.*

In Eccl 6 the Teacher tells us that searching after riches, having many children, or gaining the applause and adulation of people brings no ultimate meaning to life.

In Eccl 7 the Teacher gives us some sober advice:

*4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.
5 It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person*

than to listen to the song of fools.

Here the Teacher is admonishing us to be aware of our mortality – the transitory nature of life – and to choose wisely how we spend our time and energy.

Even though the Teacher has warned us about the shortcomings of wisdom, he still sees advantages in choosing to seek wisdom.

Eccl 6:11-12, 19

11 Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing

and benefits those who see the sun.

12 Wisdom is a shelter

as money is a shelter,

but the advantage of knowledge is this:

Wisdom preserves those who have it.

19 Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful

than ten rulers in a city.

Yet, despite lauding wisdom in chapter 6 and 7, the Teacher then concludes in chapter 8 that even wisdom has its shortcomings.

*16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labour that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night— 17 then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. **Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it.***

Searching after advice and explanations, and trying to understand such puzzling things as to why the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve brings no ultimate meaning or satisfaction.

In Ecclesiastes 9:3 the teacher observes that "*The same destiny overtakes all.*"

And in 9:6 he states: No-one knows how long they may live; and once a person has died "*never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.*"

The Teacher even seems to be overcome with pessimism when he says in 9:11:

11 I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift

or the battle to the strong,

nor does food come to the wise

or wealth to the brilliant

or favour to the learned;

but time and chance happen to them all.

The Teacher's pessimism is in stark contrast to the observation made by the Apostle Paul.

When you have welcomed Christ into your life as your Lord and Saviour **you can have** a confidence that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes lacked.

Romans 8:26-28

*26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. 28 **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.***

In Ecclesiastes 10 the Teacher observes how foolish behaviour brings no ultimate satisfaction.

*12 Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious,
but fools are consumed by their own lips.*

*13 At the beginning their words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness—*

14 and fools multiply words.

In Chapter 11 the Teacher encourages us to invest in many ventures, to be diligent, and to enjoy one's youthful vigour. But then he goes on to say:

*9 You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.*

*Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,*

but know that for all these things

God will bring you into judgment.

Sadly, the Teacher wasn't able to hear the Good News announced by Jesus:

John 10:10 NIV

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; **I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.***

Or as the New Living Translation puts it:

*The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. **My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.***

This is the verse that brought me to faith in Christ.

As a 16 year old everything was going well for me. I had no problems at home and was doing well at school. But when I heard John 10:10 quoted from the KJV:

*10 The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: **I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.***

I thought to myself: If there is some better, why not?!

I didn't stay behind to talk to the visiting evangelist out of a sense of need, but out of a – perhaps selfish desire for that "abundant life" – whatever that might mean.

It's strange, but I felt no conviction of sin or need for repentance until the evangelist, Theron Spurr invited me to kneel down in prayer. Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by a deep conviction of sin and unworthiness. As we prayed together and I invited Christ into my life I felt like I was being made brand-new. And so began my walk with Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life!

And over the years I can say with all my heart that YES, I have experienced a rich and satisfying life! (It's 65 years ago that I acknowledged Jesus as my Lord.)

And so this takes us to the final chapter, Eccl 12, where the Teacher concludes his philosophical autobiography by telling us that, in the futility of life, only fearing and obeying God brings ultimate meaning.

1 Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth,

before the days of trouble come

and the years approach when you will say,

"I find no pleasure in them"—

6 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,

and the golden bowl is broken;

before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,

and the wheel broken at the well,

*7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

13 Now all has been heard;

here is the conclusion of the matter:

*Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.*

*14 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,*

whether it is good or evil.

The life that is only lived “under the sun” and not in view of eternity, is a life devoid of ultimate meaning. The best human efforts, philosophies, achievements, experiences, and arguments will not bring satisfaction.

Apart from God, life is full of disappointments.

With Christ in your life, you can experience "abundant life", "life to the full!"

If you have never asked Jesus into your life, to be your Lord and Saviour, right now would be a good time to do that. You too can experience that "abundant life" Jesus promised.