

# Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-2/ecclesiastes-218-23/>

*Solomon examines the destiny of his legacy and the intrinsic value of his hard work, and despairs because he will leave it all to those who will eventually squander it.*

Solomon earlier rejoiced in all his labor (Ecclesiastes 2:10) and has counseled to value labor as good (Ecclesiastes 2:24). Now he *hated all the fruit of his labor*. Although living in wisdom is superior to living in folly, Solomon is fully aware he will leave the *fruit of his labor* to the *man who will come after him*. Who might well *be a fool*.

What a cruel irony. The wisest of men can enjoy massive accumulation through wisdom, then leave it for a fool to squander. The *fool* who might inherit his possessions will now *have control over all the fruit of Solomon's labor—for which he labored*. Solomon labored *by acting wisely under the sun*, but now perhaps a fool inherits it. Now, arguably, the world is worse off. A fool is empowered to produce a lot more foolishness.

This explains why Solomon *hated the fruit of his labor*. When Solomon thinks about who might inherit the *fruit* of everything for which he has *labored* with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, he cringes at the possibility of it falling under the rule of a *fool* rather than the wise. This also is an ungraspable *vanity*. An irritating vapor. And this applies to all he did *under the sun*, everything he accomplished in this earthly life.

Solomon set out to use his vast wisdom to make sense of the world. To find meaning through reason. He sought to use his vast resources to seek understanding through a broad array of accomplishment and experience. The result? He *hated the fruit of his labor*.

It is planted within the heart of humans to seek to accomplish something that lasts. Something by which one can be remembered. Something that creates a legacy. But Solomon observes that the *man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill* will inevitably hand over *his legacy to one who has not labored* for what he accumulated. And this person might be a fool. There is, therefore, no way to protect his legacy. *This too is vanity and a great evil*. He not only *hated the fruit of his labor*, he *despaired of the fruit of his labor*. The

only certainty is that the *fruit of his labor* will ultimately fall into the hands of another.

The *fruit of his labor* cannot solve the question of purpose, nor can it last the test of Time. Another will take over and *who knows* what that person will do with it. The replacement man now has *control* over the *fruit of his labor*. *This too is vanity* (see notes on Ecclesiastes 1:2).

These unexplainable reversals, where some people don't get what they deserve and others get what they should not have, are troublesome. These reversals will get further treatment later in the book. At this point all Solomon can do is ask, *What does a man get in all his labor? What does a man get in his striving* throughout all his endeavors *under the sun*? It is a question with a frustrating answer. Everyone leaves the world with the same amount of tangible wealth: none.

When relying on reason and experience, Solomon is so disappointed and bothered by his inability to discover meaning that *even at night his mind does not rest*. The reality of life's futility makes *his task painful and grievous* for *all his days*. There is nothing but puzzlement and vexation in his attempt to discover meaning and purpose in life through accomplishment, accumulation, and reason.

Solomon sought to leave a *legacy* by working with *wisdom, knowledge, and skill*. He worked hard and did it all right. Yet, in a sense, the work dies with him. Another takes it and makes it his own. Accumulation, inheritance, dissipation, repeat. The cycles of time and the impermanence of life render everything *vanity*. Vaporous.

How should people respond to this tension? Some, perhaps most, will be oblivious. Perhaps mercifully so. Others will follow Solomon, with the predictable failure of outcome. Others might shake their fist against a God who allows us to want to understand, yet lack the capacity to find the answer on our own.

Solomon, on the other hand, will reach the end of his rope, not give up, and turn the page to another approach. True understanding comes from living a life of faith and thanksgiving to God.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>8</sup> Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. <sup>19</sup> And who**

knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.<sup>20</sup> Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.<sup>21</sup> When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.<sup>22</sup> For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?<sup>23</sup> Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.