

How To Navigate Suffering With Wisdom

I have always been enamored by the book of Ecclesiastes. It is difficult to pin down precisely why this is, but it has something to do with how seemingly averse it is to the contemporary thesis that happiness is, or ought to be, the highest aspiration of the human experience.

I do not subscribe to the idea that life is about attaining happiness, and I do not believe that the Bible supports this aim either. In fact, Ecclesiastes treads much closer to the sentiment held by philosophical pessimists and absurdists, such as Albert Camus, Peter Zapffe, and Arthur Schopenhauer.

Throughout my early and mid-20s, I cut my teeth on the philosophical pessimists' work, believing, like them, that the world had simply found itself in a maelstrom of chaos, absurdity, and meaninglessness. However, the book of Ecclesiastes suggests something much different: The world did not accidentally find itself in a whirlwind of disaster, and it didn't somehow by statistical fluke begin existing. Rather, it was intentionally and specifically created. There is substantial consolation in the realization of this fact. It reminds us that the world is not spinning out of control, beyond the limits of any entity that could reel it back in, and that life's trials are not merely meaningless suffering.

The linchpin of the teaching in [Ecclesiastes](#) is that "in much wisdom is much vexation" (1:17) and that the individual who "increases [in] knowledge increases [in] sorrow " (1:18). There is a steep toll that is to be paid if one is to set out in search of knowledge and wisdom. It is not free.

Virtually everyone has heard the flourish that for every answer we attain, there are ever more questions that follow.

Is this by accident? It doesn't seem that way: It appears that our capacity for pain only expands as we arrive at more answers about the world we live in. In other words, knowledge and wisdom come with a healthy dose of suffering and agony.

This is perhaps why the second [Noble Truth](#) in [Buddhism](#) concerns itself with the cause of suffering, saying that suffering naturally follows from desire. However, Ecclesiastes does not suggest backing away from the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, as Buddhism seems to suggest. King Solomon, widely accepted as the subject of Ecclesiastes, openly accepted the contract of pain and suffering in pursuit of knowledge, [saying](#), "I applied my heart to know wisdom" (Ecclesiastes 1:17).

Solomon's life is a testament to the idea that pain and suffering should not dissuade us from pursuing knowledge and wisdom. For the Buddhist, much of life is spent attempting to evade the very substance of what it is to be alive, namely pain, suffering, and therefore the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom.

Additionally, Solomon's perspective pushes back against two ancient strands of philosophy that are still widely discussed today: Epicureanism and Stoicism. [Epicureanism](#), saying that happiness is the highest good, easily degenerates into pure hedonism, putting pleasure at the forefront of all human endeavor. [Stoicism](#), on the other hand, approaches the world in a more clinical way, suggesting, like Buddhism, that desire inevitably leads to disappointment and suffering.

Though these various philosophies are perhaps noble in certain ways, the book of Ecclesiastes stands apart. It does not teach us to run away from hardship or suffering, and it does not support the thesis that happiness can realistically be attained in this lifetime. The words of Solomon do not intend to sugarcoat the nature of reality—rather, they encourage us to face our trials head on.

Ecclesiastes seems to suggest that the pinnacle of human feeling ought to be contentment. In realizing the absurdity of the universe, we can proceed with a greater awareness that while wisdom and knowledge are wonderful things, there is, laced within them, pain and suffering. Nevertheless, we shall push forward, like Solomon, despite and in spite of the “vanity of vanities!”

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