

Despair and Joy Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Some of my favorite moments on a Sunday is interacting with our kids here. Last week as we were singing the final songs I asked one of our little four-year-old girls, “Do you like church?” **She said, “Not really, but I like the singing.”**

Refreshingly honest. Maybe one day she will say “the sermon.”

We began the book of Ecclesiastes last week, a **refreshingly honest book in the OT.** The author speaks about **the harsh realities of life under the sun – the frustrating, futile, and perplexing pains of life.**

If this book is to minister to us, we **must get honest too.** [PRAY]

Today, **we get to journey with a man who had it all, and it almost killed him.**

Picture: Tom Brady, Hugh Hefner, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett, and other famous celebrities who have certain things: power, money, influence, education, pleasure, productivity – and you begin to grasp something of Solomon’s life.

He had no unmet fantasies but none of them could satisfy his thirsty soul.

It’s not until he speaks of a relationship with God in 2:24-26 that we see the real answer to the great human pursuit of happiness.

You may not be able to identify with celebrities like these I’ve mentioned, but you can identify with Solomon’s basic human condition: **“Something is broken and something is missing.”**

- It seems like every human being realizes this.

This sense of brokenness & lack sends us hunting happiness in various places.

- **Singers echo** this.... **John Mayer:** “Something’s missing...and I don’t how to fix it”
- **Superstar Athletes** after winning championships, **“Is this all there is?”**
- **Philosophers** have written about it. Blaise Pascal: **“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both – to be happy. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”**
 - **“Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for Jesus.”**
- When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the States in 1830 he observed a **“strange melancholy”** that haunted Americans **“in the midst of abundance.”** He concluded that the joys of this world will never satisfy the human heart.
 - That strange melancholy can be seen in affluent suburbia where many of us live.
- **C.S. Lewis points us to the right direction:** “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”
- We need something *beyond the sun.*

When certain things under the sun don't satisfy, despair follows.

- That's what **idolatry** does – it leads to sorrow and despair.
- When you look to something to give you what only God can give you, then you will not find joy, your sorrows actually multiply (Ps 16).

So we can all resonate with Solomon's struggle because it's a human struggle.

- **What do you think will make you truly happy/fulfilled/satisfied?**
- **As a kid: more wrestling figures... go to a wrestling match... Nintendo, wear it out, blow on it, go to the tournaments... cars... then girlfriends... popularity... scholarship...**
- **As an adult, you look for other things... sometimes they're are *more respectable things* we pursue to fill the emptiness, an other times, *more shameful things*.**
- **How many have become the Prodigal Son, trying to find joy apart from the Father? (Strip clubs, trips to Vegas, "making it rain").**
- Solomon had all that and it lead to despair.
- It's quite the contrast to Paul said that **"having nothing, yet possessing everything."**

In this text today, we find **three causes of Solomon's despair**, and **one source of joy**.

1st Reason for Despair: Wisdom Doesn't Satisfy (1:12-1:18)

12: Solomon or one writing of Solomon's life.

13: Notice how **sincere and comprehensive** his quest was [read].

- He devoted **his heart** to this quest. **He was sincere.** (1 Kings 4:29-34; 10:23-24)
- He searched out **"all that is done under heaven"** (comprehensive).

He searched **"by wisdom"** which is commendable, but it turns out to **not be a divine wisdom** that is pursued at first – that is, **there's no mention of God's revelation**.

- Here wisdom refers to what ones learns about the world apart from God's revelation – that's a noble study but it will lack that which is central.
- You cannot answer the "why" questions, the deep questions of meaning, apart from God.

13b-15: These verses describe his unhappy efforts to understand the world [read].

13b: His **gloomy mood** is described – it is an **"unhappy business"** Two options:

1. The things human beings go about doing...
 2. The task of acquiring wisdom and seeking out the meaning of life itself - a task that left him unfulfilled is an unhappy business.
- I think the latter is better.
 - He sought out wisdom, a high pursuit but it turned out to be a lousy job.

He challenges the idea that the pursuit of knowledge fulfills life and gives a person permanent significance.

- Getting a degree or multiple degrees is fine and good (and Christians have always promoted quality education), but we do not think that is the end for which you were created.
- Information of the mind won't satisfy the needs of heart.

- People with vast brains still take part in great perversity — you think rape, and immorality and debauchery are not found in prestigious universities? We know better.
- You need more than a degree for meaning and joy.
 - I have a PhD and my dad has a GED, but I am not “more fulfilled” because I have a higher degree (and he can still beat me at Trivia Pursuit).
- We should remember Solomon here in the Triangle, in an area that boasts the most PhD’s per capita! That’s really cool and exciting but the most PhD’s do not mean the most satisfied!

13: “God” is mentioned for the first time, but not in a worshipful sense.

- He acknowledges God’s sovereign rule, which is good, but he doesn’t seem very happy about it yet: what “God has given to the children of man to be busy with”
- But on a positive note, he sees all of life as under the rule of a sovereign God.
- The intellectuals and their work are as much under God’s authority as anyone else.

14: After going everywhere and seeking out meaning by wisdom he concludes “all is vanity” and it is a “striving after the wind.”

- These are some of the Preacher’s favorite phrases.
- Trying to figure out the meaning of life was like trying to hold the wind in your hands.
- It’s like “herding cats” as we say.

15: A proverb [read]. The world is crooked (bent out of shape, and cannot be fixed) due to sin, and something is missing (what is lacking cannot be counted).

- We wish we could fix certain things: family conflicts, estrangement from friends, wrongs done to us by someone in power, disease or disability, our own moral failings, death and loss – but we can’t bend these things back in shape.
- And something is missing: life doesn’t always add up.

16-17: After pursuing these intellectual pursuits, he tries to learn of something else: “madness and folly” (which prepares us for 2:1ff).

- The same conclusion is reached. (v. 17)

18: He then reflects back on his prior quest for wisdom and says that increased knowledge meant increased grief.

- “Mo money mo problems” (Biggie)
- “Mo knowledge mo problems” (Solomon). This is why we say “ignorance is bliss.” The more we know the more sorrows we may have!

Application: Wisdom, the pursuit of meaning in life (devoid of God!) leaves one unsatisfied. (Thus far, for the most part, God has been left out of the equation!)

For now, the preacher is trying to find meaning **devoid of Scripture and prayer** – his search has been from a pure human pursuit.

- He has not considered the majesty of God, the glory of God, and of course Jesus Christ the one who would be the embodiment of wisdom.

- **A secular perspective on life leaves us with Ecclesiastes 1.**
- We will end up frustrated!
 - And we will be left to choose between *escapism, nihilism, or hedonism (and to Hedonism he will now turn in chapter 2)*
- But you don't have to have this perspective!
- We can look to the Christ who redeems us from futility, who makes straight what is crooked, who shows us the path of wisdom, and who will make all things new.
- I love how Paul says that the coming of Christ destroyed the wisdom of the wise, and offered true wisdom to all who cling to the cross (**1 Cor 1:18-24**).
- Cling to God's wisdom seen in Jesus our Crucified and Risen Redeemer; meditate on him; delight in him; for that is a happy business.

2nd Reason for Despair: Pleasure Doesn't Satisfy (2:1-11)

1: He lets us in on his inner dialogue. He proposes a test, in order to see if pleasures will provide the reason for human existence, but found this too was "vanity."

Last week I said that the word for "vanity" is the same word in Romans 8:20.

That word is also present in this text, 1 Peter 1:18, translated as futility. It's an important verse to keep in mind as we study Ecclesiastes:

*¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the **futile** ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.*

So Jesus saves us from wrath, from condemnation, but **he also saves us from stupid.** That's futility. **He died for us so that our lives will not be marked by sin, folly, rebellion, futility, empty searches for satisfaction.**

But the cross is not in view for Solomon.

So he continues searching for futile things to give him eternal meaning.

He mentions **about six insufficient sources of joy and meaning.**

2: First, **laughter** and fun didn't bring about meaning.

- **Solomon could have brought in every popular comedians into his palace: Kevin Hart, Jim Gaffigan, Trevor Noah, Jimmy Fallon.**
- **There is a laughter that glorifies God; Jesus is not a kill joy.**
 - Laughter is medicine for the soul as the Proverbs says.
 - Psalm 126: "Our mouths are filled w laughter."
- **But This is different.**
- **And the point is we need more than comedy to make sense of deep things of life.**
- **Solomon is talking about fleeting, superficial joy that might distract us from pain but it can't overcome it.**
 - **Many comedians historically have been some of the saddest people in the world, and many sadly have taken their lives.**

There is joy in this life – and we will get there, and it’s fine and good to have some fun and to laugh, but laughter is not the solution to a meaningful life.

- **No one watches Dumb and Dumber and contemplates the meaning of life!**
- But you might if you watch a film about death and tragedy and toil and agony and think about it.
- That’s why Solomon says it’s *better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. (7:2)*
- Death forces you to think about the deep questions of life.

There is a joy in God that is deeper, fuller, and everlasting, than one finds in folly; it’s found in the Savior, the Groom, the Host of the Great Banquet to come!

3: Second, he turns to **drink** – the text seems to indicate that his experienced involved:

- A more controlled experience* (not drunkenness): still “guided by wisdom” - **he’s not wasting away in Margaritaville**
 - A more wild experience* – “how to lay hold of folly.” But the party life doesn’t satisfy Solomon either.
- He tried both. **A secular connoisseur listening to opera, with his pinky out; and the frat boy dancing with a lampshade on his head drinking Johnny Walker.**
 - It’s not found in either place.

4-6: Next, he turns to making **great works, particularly his own residencies** [read].

- Imagine a palace and multiply it by ten and you might of Solomon’s crib.
- The garden imagery is not a little garden in the backyard; it is Edenic language.
- He tried to recreate the garden of Eden but that too proved empty.
- He made great aqua ducts to water his garden...

7-8a: Fourth, we read that having **possessions** didn’t satisfy either.

- He was a great landowner, having those who worked on the land for him (v. 7).
- He had all kinds of cattle. He ate well.
- He had silver and gold. (1 Kings 4.20ff)

8b: Fifth, he had **singers** in the palace –

- **He didn’t need a new IPod. He could just have Ed Sheeran, Post Malone, Drake, Maroon 5 or whomever singing for him!**

8c: Finally, Solomon had numerous women, engaging in sexual indulgence.

- A concubine was given to a man for sexual pleasure.
- **He was the Wilt Chamberlin of his day; or today, the person who spends hours looking for satisfaction in endless pornography.**

9-10a: He had the lifestyle of the rich and famous, and says that he retained his wisdom (v. 9), and that he sought to fulfill all his desires (10a).

10: Notice though that joy was not found in these things, but actually in the actual toil. (He shows his cards a bit here, as we eventually see this as one of the sources of joy).

11: The actual possessions and completion of projects did not lead to joy.

- Once he reflects on his projects and his experiment with pleasure, he finds no resolution – all remains a striving after the wind.
- “Most Americans today experience more pleasure than most people in the history of the world. Yet in spite of our prosperity – or maybe because of it – we still suffer from poverty of the soul. The taste of pleasure has grown our appetite for this world beyond satisfaction. Meanwhile, we are still searching desperately for meaning in life.” (Ryken)

Application: So we are faced with this question: What do you think you need to be happy?

- More comedy? More alcohol? Bigger home and garden? More possessions? More money? More entertainment and music? More sexual fantasies fulfilled?
- Don't turn there. Learn from Solomon.
- Learn to see things rightly; deconstruct them, de-mythologized them. They can't give you what Christ can give you – ever.
- Young people: These things will not satisfy and they will not save: So trust Christ!
 - You need a faith of your own.
 - You will not stand before the Lord in your parents custody; but by yourself.

All of us, see here: Life is not about accumulating more; it's about treasuring the Savior more, and pouring our lives out for the good others – this is satisfying.

- Jesus is the bread of life; the best wine, the highest joy; the treasure hidden in a field.
- "I consider all things as rubbish compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3)
- "Take the world, but give me Jesus." "To live is Christ and to die is gain."
- And in pouring ourselves out for the good of others, we find life that is truly life.

Notice how often Solomon says, "I" "me" or "myself" in this passage.

- It is mentioned about 40 times in this passage.
- A self-centered, self-absorbed life is not a fulfilling life.
- Westminster: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."
- Solomon: "The chief end of man is to glorify self and enjoy myself forever."

You can enjoy God in the pleasures of creation, through him, in reference to him, but not rightly if you are apart from him.

“Pleasure is only safe when God is there” (Ryken):

- We can have great laughter when we consider God's goodness to us and the joy that he brings us, not by laughing at vulgar things or at someone's expense.
- We can receive food and drink as gifts to be enjoyed with gratitude, consumed rightly, to God's glory, as a foretaste to come.
- We can glorify God when we gaze upon beautiful parks, gardens and the sights of creation, seeing God's handiwork there...
- We can glorify God through sex when it is done through God's beautiful design seen in Scripture.

We are going to get to this point in verses 24-26.

Life must be lived in relationship to God and for the glory of God, not apart from God and for ourselves.

3rd Reason for Despair: Death Is Inevitable (2:12-23)

Solomon recaps his pursuit of wisdom and pleasure, but now in view of the inevitability of death.

12: No king after me could search out wisdom and pleasure more than me, he says.

13-14: Being wise is better than being foolish.

- Wisdom is like light – you can know where you’re going.
- The fool walks in darkness.

14b: Sad conclusion: Even though the wiser person can see death coming and can avoid making some dumb decisions, **he cannot avoid death.**

- Both die. This is the result of Genesis 3.
- Death is the great equalizer.
- We may invent a lot of things to possibly make life better, but we can’t stop death.

15: He reiterates the point [read]. This is a sobering reality for the Preacher.

16: Added to the inevitability of death is the sad reality that both the wise and foolish will be forgotten.

17: This is a lament. He doesn’t “hate God” — he hates “life.”

- Over 20 times in 12 chapters he exalts God as Creator, Good, Wise, Just, Redeemer.
- It’s like Job, “Let the day perish on which I was born.
- When he considers the sobering truths about life in a fallen world, he laments.
- Romans 8 - we groan in this fallen world.
- We watched the news, and we weep.
- We weep at the harm people due to others; we weep at our own sin.
- We get emails and weep — **last week, David, dies of a heart attack.**
- **It’s all grievous.**
- We long for Jesus to wipe our tears away and make it all new.
- We go to our Father in the pain and pour out our hearts to him.

18-19: He reflects more on toil and the inevitability of death [read]

- **I have to leave it behind**... and how knows what they will do with it!
- In Solomon’s life, his sons would be a total disaster, the kingdom would divide. (1 Kings 12

20-21: Result: Despair. He looks at life it brings tears.

22-23: Lament: Our days are full of sorrow and vexation and we can’t sleep!

- There’s no rest for the weary.

- One can worry about not having enough work.
- Others worry because they have so much to do, they don't see how it will get done
- Others worry because the kind of work they do so stressful...
- The workaholic is not content.

Application: Death is inevitable.

- Solomon considers this truth and it leads to despair, because like pleasure and wisdom he *is considering death without God in the picture.*
- Christians know death is a doorway into the presence of Jesus.
- We know the grave is not the end; that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord — not even death.

Transition: Finally, he sees God as the solution to his frustration, as he mentions God for the first time in a positive light, as he considers Gods' grace and justice...

1 Solution for Meaning and Joy: Knowing the God of Grace and Justice (2:24-26)

Is there any hope for the person who has tried it all, and it's only left them with an empty heart? Yes.

Here we find the great alternative to all that has been considered...

- We are almost shocked to have such optimistic verses!
- It is an oasis of delight in a desert of despair!

Notice the phrase in **verse 25**, “**for apart from him** who can...”

- So far everything has been “apart from” a relationship with God.
- But in a right relationship with God one can find meaning and joy.
- Previously toil and things in creation like food and drink couldn't bring joy, but now they can. Why?

What makes the difference? God makes the difference!

- **God's presence makes the difference!**
- God has not been central in his quest, but now He is.
- If God is not at the center of your life, your life will not make sense and it will not have joy.
- **If God is not at the center, what happens is we take things (work, pleasure) and try to make them “God,” rather than seeing them as gifts from God – the former is idolatry.**
- But if we see God as the giver of every good gift, that leads to joyful and meaningful worship; if we see him as just, the one who will make all wrong things right, then that will lead to meaningful worship.
 - “For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.” (Ps 33.21)

He describes God as being both “gracious” and “just.”

This is the God who must know and the God who must be central.

A. Receiving God's Grace (2:24-25)

24: Enjoy your food, drink, and work – this is from “the hand of God.”

- “The hand of God” denotes God’s grace.
- He now sees life not as a “striving” but as a “receiving.”
- Those who know the God of grace have the ability to enjoy the little things such as food, drink, and work – the things our parents did in the garden.
 - See 3:12, 22, 8:15
 - We are to enjoy God’s gifts in creation to his glory.
- **Ps 104**, “God rejoices in his works” – image bearers of God can rejoice in our work.
 - Solomon says, “Take this job and love it”
 - NT teaches that we do our work unto Christ, who take our work into account (Col 3:23-24)
- We can receive bread, wine, oil, labor, relationships as gifts to be received with grateful hearts.

25: Apart from him, who can eat or have enjoyment?

- You can’t! Not ultimately! Not fully!
- This is a life-changing statement: You can’t have true meaning and joy apart from a relationship with God.
- Life is empty without the God who made us.
- “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”
- Endless enjoyment doesn’t come from a new Iphone, it comes from renewed intimacy with God.

Here is a good NT summary of what we’re considering:

1 Tim 6:17-19

¹⁷As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

(cf., 1 Tim 4:4-5)

- Don’t set your hope on riches, **but in the God of grace**, receiving his gifts as evidences of his goodness...
- And instead of thinking about “self, self, self,” **be generous, thinking about others.**
- And realize that you **work will be rewarded**... this is the *life that is truly life*.

B. Resting in God’s Justice (2:26)

The theme of **justice** will reappear now in the book, along with thoughts like enjoyment, beauty (3:11), God’s gifts (3:13), security (3:14), and other positive themes.

- Here he says that the sinner and the righteous **will be appropriately handled by God**: As a general rule, God blesses the righteous with wisdom and joy, but the wicked have a different experience: frustration.
- Of course, the righteous may suffer, but the principle will be borne out, as ultimately, “the meek will inherit the earth.”

- The Preacher adds that God also even uses the wicked to serve his sovereign purposes.
- God is involved now, and God will have the final word later, in his work as judge of all the earth.

It actually does matter that you live to please God because God is the judge and he takes everything into account.

If God is not gracious, we have no hope and joy – but He is!

If God is not just, there is no point to our service – but He is!

Final judgment gives meaning literally everything you ever do in life!

- Ryken entitles Ecclesiastes “Why Everything Matters” – everything matters because God is judge. This is actually good news because it shows that what we do matters!
- So seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Anticipate the day in which we enjoy the great feast with our Messiah, who will satisfy us forever in a new creation.

- The Messiah who said “no” to the temptations of Solomon, living a sinless life, and who then put God’s grace and justice on fully display at the cross.
 - Forgiven us of our hedonism, our futility...
- The Messiah who rose conquering death – death that awaits us all!
- The Messiah who right now provides his people with lasting meaning and joy, who tells us our labor done in his name is not in vain!