

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-2:26
(OT: Ps 36:5-9; NT: Jn 4:7-14)

INTRODUCTION

- Preacher gives us summary of last week's sermon in **V14: I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.**
 - **Vanity** is the Hebrew *hevel* which means breath, smoke, vapor.
 - Life is a breath. You will die. You will be forgotten.
- But now, Preacher is going to put this thesis – that all is *hevel* – to the test.
 - One thing to declare it in poetic language → Another to experience it in real life.
 - What **chp 1** describes poetically, **chp 2** describes practically.
- So, we've got a bit of a Good News/Bad News situation:
 - **Good News:** If you missed last week, this week will catch you up.
 - **Bad News:** If you didn't miss last week, you're in for a similar message again...

Transition: In this passage, Preacher goes on journey to find meaning/satisfaction under the sun.

- Let's join him in his pursuit of happiness as discovers that – Point 1: **Nothing Matters.**
- Preacher tries series of things to make himself happy...

NOTHING MATTERS

[Education – 1:16-18]

- First, as a bushy-tailed high-school graduate, he looks **Education.**
 - **V16: I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.**
 - Heads off to University of Jerusalem and attacks his studies...¹
 - Takes hardest classes with meanest professors → And then aces all exams.
 - Gets himself a well-rounded education but then concludes:
 - **V17:** It was all a **striving after wind.**
 - Education didn't make him happy → Indeed, **V18: in much wisdom is much vexation.**
 - Hebrew word **vexation** means anger/provocation/grief/indignation.
 - In our divided culture, find plenty of those on any college campus.
 - Preacher says: You think your education or college your kids go to matters? *Hevel.*
 - Don't believe the lie that academic success is the key to a happy life.
 - That getting good grades and going to the right school...
 - Somehow guarantees a successful life.
 - Pour all your time/energy/money into academia and you'll end up as what?
 - An academic!
 - All know how insane, out of touch, and agenda-driven they can be!
- None of this made the Preacher happy.*

Transition: In next scene Preacher, like many college students, turns from education to see if he can find meaning/satisfaction at a **party.**

[Parties – 2:1-3]

- That's where we find him in **2:1: I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself."**
 - If being sensible hasn't done the job, how about we try a different approach?
 - Hits up bars and breweries.
 - Laughs till he's hoarse and parties till the wee hours.
 - But even being happy didn't make him *happy* → Look what he concludes:
 - **V1: behold, this also was vanity.**
 - He woke up in the morning and said, "Never again."
- Preacher says: You think any kind of social scene will make you happy? *Hevel*.
 - Might be **crude**: Nights you don't remember *where* were/*who* with/*what* did.
 - Might be **sophisticated**: Nights at refined restaurants/listening to the orchestra.
 - Different versions of the same thing and both are *hevel*.

None of this made the Preacher happy.

Transition: When education/partying didn't work out, Preacher graduates and heads off to work.

[Work – 2:4-7]

- Maybe meaning/satisfaction are found in discipline, production, hard **work**?
 - Look how Preacher attacks it! **VV4:7: I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵I made myself gardens and parks... ⁶I made myself pools... ⁷I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.**
 - And did any of it make him happy?
 - Jump down to **2:18: I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun...**
 - None of it made any difference, all of it was dust and ashes.
- You think work will make you happy? *Hevel*.
 - Last week we said and now say again:
 - You're going to grind/strive for years, deal with anxiety/stress, miss things with your family, give yourself ulcers, and then die.
 - Then all you've accumulated will pass to someone who might be wise or might be a fool (Preacher says that here in **2:19**) → Blow whole thing in some stupid investment or donate it to a cause with which you don't agree.
 - And then there's the pointlessness of the work itself: **Leonard Woolf** (British publisher, political theorist, and husband to Virginia Woolf) had this to say about his life's work: "I see clearly that I have achieved **practically nothing**. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played Ping-Pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of **perfectly useless work.**"²

None of this made the Preacher happy.

Transition: But hold on, if work itself didn't bring meaning/satisfaction, maybe fruit of it will?

[Success – 2:8-10]

- That's what Preacher tries next: Is happiness found in fruit of **success**?
 - Notice how looks to that famous triumvirate of money/sex/power:
 - **Money: V8a:** I also gathered for myself **silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.** **Sex: V8b:** I got singers, both men and women, and **many concubines**, the delight of the sons of man. **Power: V9:** So I became **great and surpassed all** who were before me in Jerusalem.
 - This is the stuff of Hollywood dreams: Top of *Forbes* billionaire list, more beautiful women than knows what to do with, living life on the A-list.³
 - Yet look what he concludes: **V11:** Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was **vanity** and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
- You think success – money/sex/power – will make you happy?⁴
 - Most of us do...
 - Most of us think this is right path → Just need to get farther down it.
 - Happiness on other side of that next promotion, pay raise, house, kitchen, vacation, relationship, spouse.
 - But you know who doesn't think so → Doesn't think happiness found in success?
 - The ultra-successful: Sad twist that often you must get everything you thought you wanted before you realize you wanted the wrong thing.
 - **Karl Rabeder** (Austrian businessman turned philanthropist) said this: "For a long time, I believed that **more** wealth and luxury automatically meant **more** happiness... But over time a conflicting feeling developed. More and more I heard the words, "Stop what you're doing now – all this luxury and consumerism – and start your real life." I had the feeling I was working as a slave for things that I did not wish for or need... It was the biggest shock in my life when I realized how **horrible, soulless**, and without **feeling** the five-star lifestyle is."
None of this made the Preacher happy.

Transition: Education, parties, work, success → Here is a man who had it all.

- But in the end, none of it mattered. WHY?
- Bc none of these things could give him the ultimate satisfaction he was looking for.
- And he knew that in the end, he'd lose them all to death...

[All Undone by Death]

- Look at **V14:** The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the **same event happens to all** of them.
 - Do what you want with your life → But in end **the same event happens to all.**
 - Accomplish whatever you want → End up dead like everyone else.
 - Be as special/different as you can be → Death is the great equalizer.
- **V16:** For of the wise as of the fool there is **no enduring remembrance**, seeing that in the days to come all will have been **long forgotten**. How the wise dies just like the fool!
 - Wisest person on earth/village idiot → Both placed in box/buried underground.
 - Then both are forgotten → We leave no legacy here on earth.

- **V17:** So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is **vanity** and a striving after wind. *Hevel*.
 - In the end, all he pursued didn't make him happy...
 - And nothing he achieved added up to anything.
- As depressing as all this sounds, again I invite you to consider that under the sun it's true:
 - **Blaise Pascal** (French philosopher from 17C): "As men have not been able to cure death, misery, or ignorance, they have taken to not thinking about them so as to become happy."⁵
 - We distract ourselves – with busyness, work, endless activities...
 - Then when silence comes – hours of scrolling, podcasts, Netflix.
 - Have the courage to look reality in the eye.

Here's the summary:

- Life is a breath. You will die. You will be forgotten.
- In meantime, you can fill life with whatever you want, but it won't make you happy.
- Nothing matters.

Transition:

- When we accept it, might be able to receive conclusion Preacher has for us in **VV24-26**.
- What is his conclusion? Something surprisingly happy...
 - Under the sun, nothing matters...
 - But from a different perspective...

EVERYTHING MATTERS

- This is how a friend summarizes Ecclesiastes: *Nothing Matters. Everything Matters*.⁶
 - If all we have is this life → Nothing matters...
 - But if there's more... Well, do you see Preacher's conclusion:
- **VV24-25:** There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is **from the hand of God**,²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?
 - Haven't heard about God so far → What a difference his appearance makes!
 - Hopelessness is human perspective → But in him have a hope that outlives death.

That's what we have in Christ.

 - Under the sun, nothing is new...
 - So, he came from above to make all things new...
- The eternal hope we have in him reverses everything.
 - Yes, all is *hevel* under the sun...
 - But from the hand of God joy comes...
- For the preacher: Finding ultimate meaning in God frees you to enjoy the things of life.
 - We have ultimate meaning in God.
 - **V26:** For to the one who pleases him God has given **wisdom and knowledge and joy**.
 - This is a gospel verse:
 - We can't please God by trying harder.
 - He is pleased with us in his Son → By faith we become beloved sons/daughters, with whom he is well-pleased.

- And it is his pleasure to give us all things:
 - Wisdom, knowledge, joy...
 - Meaning and satisfaction that even death can't destroy.
 - The very thing people spend their whole lives looking for is given freely to us as a gift.
 - So now, we can enjoy the things of life.
- One commentator, **Derek Kidner**, puts it this way: "In themselves, and rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good... What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give..."⁷
 - When expect basic things of life – education, parties, work, success, money, sex, power, food/drink – to give us meaning/purpose/joy → We're expecting them to give us something they can never deliver.
 - But once we've found deep satisfaction in the pleasure of God, we are then free to enjoy these basic things for what they are.
- Let me make this as concrete as I can:
 - **Education:** When you stop using it to create self-importance or validate your parenting, you and your kids can enjoy it for what it is.
 - Enjoy discovering more about this wildly beautiful world our God has created.
 - Enjoy college and all opportunities it gives you to explore and grow.
 - **Parties:** When you stop using them to feel popular or look for fulfillment in some kind of pleasure, you can enjoy the heck out of life.
 - Laugh long and loud with dear friends...
 - Enjoy the best wine as you wait to drink with Jesus in the world to come.
 - **Work:** When you stop using it to become important and influential, you can enjoy it without it ruling your life.
 - Be grateful that God has given you work to do that provides for you and your family.
 - Look for ways your work can bless others in the community.
 - **Success:** When you stop making it the be-all-and-end-all, you can really enjoy the things themselves.
 - **Money** becomes a good gift from God's hand that you can steward for your own joy and the welfare of others.
 - **Sex** becomes an indescribable/unnecessary gift from God's hand that you can enjoy the way he's designed.
 - **Power** (or authority) becomes something for which you give thanks and steward carefully for the welfare of others.
- With this perspective you'll see his goodness everywhere:
 - Warmth of the sun on your neck; the taste of coffee on your deck.
 - Goofiness of kids as they lose tooth, vulnerable conversation with a friend/spouse.
 - Smile you share with the postman who delivers your mail; laughter with friends as you share a meal.
 - Comfort of God in the midst of your sorrows; presence of Jesus who gives you hope for tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

- Here's my SIS: **In the gospel you get to have your cake and eat it too.**
 - God gives you eternal meaning/satisfaction by his grace.
 - And then he frees you to enjoy this life as a gift.
- Can I encourage you to take this mindset into your week?
 - Enjoy the fact that you have eternal life in him.
 - Then write a list of all the blessings he's given.

In God, life is beautiful → And none of it is hevel.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a littler deeper.

- Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*.
- David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*.
- Walter Kaiser, *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*.
- Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*.
- Tim Mackie, *The Bible Project: Wisdom of Ecclesiastes*.
- John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ: A Treatise in Which the Whole Controversy about Universal Redemption is Fully Discussed*.
- Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*.
- Philip Ryken, *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes*.
- Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

Endnotes

¹ I owe this line to David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 39.

² Quoted in Philip Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 38-39.

³ See Gibson, 41.

⁴ I owe this bullet (and the Rabeder quote) to Ray Cortese, *The Search for Satisfaction*, accessed [here](#) 9/14/23.

⁵ Quoted in Gibson, 43.

⁶ See Paul Jeon, *Nothing Matters, Everything Matters*, accessed [here](#) 9/16/23.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 35.