

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 2:18-26
“From Despair to Delight”
February 18, 2024

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴ 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? ²⁶ For to **the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to **one who pleases God**. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. ¹**

When someone asks, “How are you doing?”, what is the response that most people give?

“Fine.”

It is an automatic response. We respond with “fine” because truthfully, there are times we are fine. But, what about the other times?

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Ec 2:18–26). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Seriously, have you ever responded with “fine, how are you?” but honestly, you were not fine. Not only that, but you also really didn’t care how the other person was doing because your level of not being fine was so high.

Since we’re together as a church today in this group counseling session, we can be honest.

There are times we are *not* fine.

That is what Solomon was facing.

He was not fine.

Taking today’s passage as a continuation of what we have already read in previous weeks, it is clear.

Solomon was growing more frustrated by the day with what he was seeing as “life as usual.” Thus, he declares that everything in life is vanity and a chasing after the wind.

He even stated in the passage we read last week that he “hated his life.”

In this passage, Solomon follows up his hatred of life statement with a clarification about how much he hates his work.

Life – I hate it.

Work – I hate it.

How are you doing Solomon?

Fine.

Not really.

While he states he hates his life, that is not the real issue. His clarity about hating work seems more to the point...but, that too is not the real issue. I mean, if we want to stay in the shallow end of the pool we can just pretend these common hatreds of work and life are the point and leave it at that. Life is hard so here's a Bible verse to read to make you feel better. Here's two verses. Read these and let me know how you feel after that. You know what? That prescription is like giving someone ibuprofen for a stab wound. It may help a bit, but ultimately, it's not going to do much. So, to offer only surface-level, sugar-coated, feel-good teaching that refuses to see the fulness of God's message to us would be a disservice to you and to me, and ultimately would do nothing for the church. Well...it would do something for the church, but nothing good or helpful.

Solomon has determined that the toil, the work in his life was worthless. So, as he sits contemplating all the things of life that he can consider, he parks here and loudly declares to all the congregation know "I hate my job."

But there's more.

Solomon wants his life to matter. He wants to matter. He sees so much waste and emptiness. He is afraid.

Like William Carey, the great Baptist missionary of old stated when asked about his fear of going onto the mission field, "I am not afraid of failure; I'm afraid of succeeding at things that don't matter."²

That is Solomon. That is us.

Most people want to make a difference. To toil at useless tasks that do nothing would lead us all to the same place Solomon was.

² Fellowship of Christian Athletes, *360 Coach: A Biblical Approach to Coaching the Heart, Mind, and Body* (Savage, MN: Broadstreet, 2022), 16.

While it may seem that this is just a guy venting about how frustrated he is in life, we will see how God reveals that there is much more happening here. Perhaps...and I believe very likely...God will reveal some things to us through this passage that bring clarity, depth, and understanding. Ultimately, as stated last Sunday, this will allow us to leave the darkness and be in the light so that we may see, know, and better understand. And...ultimately rest in the promises of God fully. Trusting him. Wholly.

In this passage there are some things clearly bubbling to the top. We will cover those but will skim the top layer off to see what truly is going on.

There is much in this section and do not forget that it just part of the full story of Ecclesiastes. Yet, in this short section, we see clearly that Solomon is working through his feelings of

- Disgust
- Despair
- Delight

To misquote Meat Loaf “One out of three ain’t bad,” right?

So what causes this?

DISGUST

Solomon is disgusted with life. He stated in verse 17 that he hated his life. Honestly, this is a cry for help scary statement. Then, in verse 18, he goes further.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

¹⁸I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for

which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.³

Here is a man who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was the son of a king and now a king of the people of Israel. He accumulated so many things – land, power, gardens, slaves, servants, musicians, concubines, wives, and more.

Yet, he is complaining. And some in the congregation of the day likely heard him and thought “I’d love to have what you have. How dare you complain.” Solomon, the Preacher says “I hated all my work” and that seems so very odd, for this is no blue-collar worker sweating for a buck just to make a living. This is the king. But, we see here what we know if we read biographies and follow the lifestyles of the rich and famous throughout time (at least those who allow us behind the façade presented) that all the stuff in the world will never be enough to bring meaning, purpose, and peace.

“I hated all my toil...seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.” Wow! This is telling.

The nepo-baby Solomon is griping about the fact that as he finds himself closer to his own end on earth than his beginning that he will end up leaving all his stuff to someone related to him who does not deserve it. Brutal honesty here before the nation.

I will have to leave all this I have worked for to my children who haven’t worked for it, do not appreciate it, and will do whatever they desire with it. Solomon is stating that after we die, we have absolutely no control over how our heirs will spend our life earnings.⁴ The point is not the verbiage in a will, but the reality that ultimately a dead person no longer has a verbal say. Rashi, a commentator from Medieval times believed that Solomon in his aged state foresaw that his glorious

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:18–19.

⁴ O’Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 59.

kingdom would shortly after his death fracture in the days of his son Rehoboam. This was a feeling of powerlessness that he was facing.⁵

This is a tale that we see repeated in history, but this is a Bible story we often don't highlight.

This is not a declaration about the depravity of Solomon's descendants, but a statement bathed in fear and frustration. What's beneath this statement is a realization that death will come whether he wants it to or not and once it happens, all that he has worked for will be divided up. Things that were of value to him will be worthless to some who come behind him. Things that mattered much to him won't matter much at all to others.

Solomon has a poor theology of life which means he has an incomplete and underdeveloped theology of death. And if this is possible for the wisest man in history, it is likely more so for Christians today who settle for a doctrine of children's Sunday school answers along with an add-on Jesus to an already busy life rather than a total surrender.

Disgust leads to despair.

DESPAIR

Ecclesiastes 2:20-23

²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. ⁶

⁵ O'Donnell, 59.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:20–23.

He states that he turned about and gave his heart up to despair.

What?

Hatred leads to disgust. Disgust leads to despair. Despair leads to death.

The wisdom he has is not enough to fight this.

But here's the deeper reality. Rather than just an old man angry that his descendants will destroy his legacy and that his work seems worthless, Solomon is stuck in a cyclical lie that screams loudly to him that "NOTHING MATTERS!" This is where his broken theology of death rears its head.

You see, not unlike many other religions around the world and the belief system of many pagan cultures surrounding Israel, Solomon too has bought into a cyclical or circular understanding of time and life.

This "Circle of Life" is a more than a Lion King theme song, but a philosophy of life espoused by God's enemy for ages, disguised in various places around the world and eras throughout history as Buddhism, Hinduism, humanism, Baal worship, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, Norse, and other mythological teachings, not to mention Middle Eastern nature worship and idolatry.

The circular understanding of time leaves Solomon where many find themselves today.

- "Whatever I do, it won't end well...it is what it is and what am I to do?"
- "It is what it is."
- "Life goes on."
- "What will be, will be."
- "Nothing new under the sun."
- "Life is a striving after the wind."

The God who transcends time because he created time did not make it look like a snake swallowing its own tale. The biblical worldview of time is not circular. If so, then we continue to need a Savior who would incarnate, live, die on a cross, rise again and again and again, and so it goes.

Why is Solomon in despair? Because he is caught in a loop. And he cannot find a way out.

The bad that happened before will happen again. Fools do foolish things regardless if you change the names of the fools or put them in other places. Any attempt at leaving a legacy will be destroyed by the next generation who falsely believes they are the wisest, best, fastest, strongest generation to ever live. And every generation seemingly expresses this.

It seems. But time is not circular or cyclical, but linear.

So, when you dig beneath the surface, you discover that the despair that Solomon is facing is not simply due to lamenting a future that hasn't happened, but because he has a broken believer. In other words, he is believing wrongly. He is trapped. He is caught. And in his broken, depraved understanding of death some things have truly died for him – purpose, joy, peace, hope, and meaning.

Whew! Can you relate?

Maybe you're caught in a loop?

Good news (even Solomon alluded to it.) He was discovering what we have given to us.

DELIGHT

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25

²⁴ 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?⁷

The cure for an addiction to death culture and perpetual despondency is Christ. Life. True life.

The timeline is linear. Your timeline is linear.

You are an image-bearer of the one true God. Made in his image and created for his glory.

Yes, you and I are eternal beings, but only eternal in one direction. Listen, we are not Mormon, so none of us were created as spirit babies awaiting implanting into a human body. We are not Hindu with a reincarnated spirit over the ages, coming back time and again to a better or worse caste. We are eternal in one direction because we as created beings, unlike the Creator, have a beginning. As we were knit together in our respective mother's wombs, we began...by God's design. Born. Living as a baby, toddler, child, teenager, and adult. Ultimately, destined to an eternal existence. All of us. Eternity...somewhere. Either with the Father or not. Heaven or hell. It is true.

Solomon was wrestling with this and trying to understand. We will talk more about this in future weeks, but for today, this disgusted, angry, frustrated, hurt, empty, done with it, despairing man was looking at all he could see under the sun and finding...well...nothing. Nothing of purpose. Nothing of hope. Nothing of meaning. Why? Because he was looking widely and missed the narrow truth.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:24–25.

Like many.

How does disgust and despair turn into delight? By abandoning a bad theology of life, death, and time, and surrendering to a biblical kingdom theology. You matter, certainly, but not because you do things, accumulate things, leave things to your kids, attend community events, earn awards, and more. You matter because you are God's image-bearer. The things of your life matter not because you have or do them, but because with a proper perspective all that you have and do is no longer for you, but for God. For the kingdom.

Theologian G.J. Spykman clarified Solomon's journey as revealed in this book this way. He said, "Nothing matters but the kingdom, but because of the kingdom everything matters."⁸

Delight is found in Christ.

Because of Christ...everything matters.

⁸ G.J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 478.