

Ecclesiastes 2: 1-26 – What's The Point?

Where is true and lasting happiness to be found and how does one live the good life? I suspect all of us, to some degree or another, have spent time mulling over those questions. And if we haven't, then surely we should! To live life without grappling with those big questions of meaning and purpose is like driving aimlessly around without a map or sense of direction. And whilst that might be quite fun for a while, it's ultimately frustrating and fruitless.

The question of finding true and lasting happiness, of discovering how to live the good life, those are topics the writer of Ecclesiastes wrestles with for 12 chapters and it's where we are going to be spending our Sunday mornings up until the beginning of Lent. In fact, it's where we began last week in chapter 1 with an incredibly uplifting New Year's Day talk. If you missed it, here are the two main points: despite all our hope and optimism at the start of 2017, nothing much will change; and despite all our efforts and strivings this year and beyond, nothing we do will last. That's where the word meaningless came in, a phrase which means insubstantial and as temporary as foggy vapour. But there was hope too. All this meaninglessness stems from a life lived "under the sun", that is a life lived without reference to God. But as we saw, a life lived with God, a life lived with eternity in view offers real meaning and true fulfilment.

But the Teacher isn't content with basing his arguments on his observations of creation; he knows that if his words of wisdom are going to carry any weight they need to be backed up with real research. And that's what we find in chapter 2 as the Teacher, both through the eyes of Solomon, his successors and no doubt his own practical experience too, takes a look at the kind of things which people then and today base their lives and hopes upon. And so he throws himself into joy and pleasure, into drinking and physical pleasure, into work and great projects, and into accumulating great wealth and power, to see if these things have any ultimate value. And what he's looking for isn't the level of satisfaction he gets at the time, he wants to be able to look back at the end of his life and say there is something that will truly last. He's looking for ultimate and lasting value. He wants his life to count for something, and surely we do too, don't we? I know I do!

So what does he find? Let's find out.

He starts with pleasure in verse 1 and laughter in verse 2. The word pleasure here isn't necessarily immoral wild abandon. Throughout the Bible joy and pleasure are things that God brings. It's good to laugh, it's good to spend time with friends, it's great to watch a good movie or listen to great music or see a comedian, although if you do the latter that can I suggest two things: Firstly don't sit near the front, and secondly never, ever let them know you're a vicar!

Laughter and pleasure are good things and yet what does the Teacher find? He discovers that in themselves, these things are meaningless, just foggy vapour. They are a bit like a ride in an amusement park: you pay your money, you scream, you laugh, and then it ends and you have nothing tangible to show for it.

Since he hasn't found anything solid with joy and laughter the Teacher turned to drink. He isn't depressed or looking for a way to obliterate his questions or problems, he's on a search for wisdom. He wants to know if the world does look better from the bottom of a glass. If there is some altered state, either through drink or drugs, that helps bring true meaning and lasting joy then the Teacher wants to know. So he experiments, his mind still guiding him he says in verse three, although just how far his mind would be able to guide him after a couple bottles of wine is unclear! But again the result is meaninglessness. The only tangible things that come out of a bout of heavy drinking are a sore head, an upset stomach, messed up relationships and an empty wallet! None of which are of any eternal value. The morning after the night before shows us just how empty drugs and alcohol are at providing any real and lasting meaning.

Having found that fun and laughter and drink don't do the trick the Teacher turns to work, and if you look through the list in verses 4-9 it's fair to say that the Teacher accomplishes a great many things. The picture in here is of a recreated Eden. The garden is planted with all kinds of fruit trees and generously watered. It's a place of safety, security, pleasure and plenty. That's what all his work is about, and it's what so many people today are striving after. I wonder if you're one of them?

Perhaps you have said to yourself "Pleasures and experiences may be fleeting but if I can end my days with a nice home of my own, a manicured garden, productive vegetable beds, with my family around me and perhaps several sports cars parked outside, then I will finally have arrived. I'll finally have achieved something!" And if fame and renown come along as well, so be it, then you'll be just like the Kardashians or the Beckhams or the Windsors, or whoever it is you look up to and envy.

And the writer of Ecclesiastes certainly reaches that kind of height doesn't he. He's got a massive workforce looking after his flocks. He's got a bulging bank account, treasures from all over the world, a personal band of musicians and a private harem providing him with all the physical gratification he could possibly desire. This is full-blown hedonism, as verse 10 makes clear: *"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil."* Isn't that the kind of life so many people today are seeking? Well this guy had it all and what's more he enjoyed it all. He enjoyed the work, he enjoyed his riches and he enjoyed his harem. He is not a miserable rich man; all these things brought him delight and pleasure and yet, verse 11: *"when I surveyed all my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."*

How can he say that? How can a man who had achieved so much and who had amassed so much say that it was all meaningless, just foggy vapour? He can say it because he knows that none of it lasts. Remember he is seeking for a tangible profit at the end of life not just some fun on the way. In verses 12 to 14 he can see the logic in being wise and doing things well, because, verse 13, *"wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness."* A wise person will be able to make the most of the opportunities that come their way, to make decisions that bring more joy and happiness both to themselves and others, and there is a certain value in that. But for someone who is after real meaning, someone who is seeking a lasting legacy wisdom and riches and pleasure and fame and fortune just aren't enough because, verse 16, *"Like the fool, the wise too must die!"*

You see death is ultimately the great leveller that makes fools of us all. We may not subscribe to the same deluded religion as the Egyptian pharaohs who were so desperate to hold onto their earthly treasures that they were buried with them, but so many of us strive through life to accumulate wealth or achieve great things because we think they will last after we have gone. Well the teacher in Ecclesiastes shows us the emptiness of that.

In verse 16 he says that legacies don't last as both wise people and foolish people are soon forgotten by history. A businessman may build up a big company but when they die it's all sold off or closed down. A sportsman owns a wonderful reputation; a real fan's favourite, but when they get too old to play no one cares about them anymore. And as for wealth and possessions well, we don't take them with us. They get passed on to those who come after and as the Teacher points out there is no way of knowing whether they are going to be treasured or wasted. eBay is regularly the place where treasured family heirlooms are sold for a few pounds because the person to whom they were left doesn't like them at all. The stark truth is that we enter the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. And so we have to ask ourselves, as the writer of Ecclesiastes does in verse 22, *"what do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest."*

Do you recognise this in yourself? Are you someone who is driven to succeed in work, in sport? Are you desperate to accumulate wealth to enjoy your retirement? Perhaps you know the kind of anxiety the

writer speaks of here, the constant worries that keep you awake at night and rob you of the joy you are trying to seek? Does that describe you or someone you know? I've met many people like that. Some have been able to enjoy things a little on the way but many others are made miserable by the thing they worship and desire most of all. And at their funerals, when the long list of their achievements is read out, those things do nothing to temper grief or heal the pain of loss or bring hope in the darkness.

We live in a culture which has greater access to information, to drink, drugs, material wealth, to sex and that has more leisure time than any previous generation and yet ours is an age of melancholy because none the things we have and seek after scratch where we itch. What's the point of a life lived like this? Ultimately there is none! Meaningless, says the teacher; all foggy vapour: a life seeking only pleasure or joy or achievement is like chasing after the wind. And if that is the case, you've got to ask yourself "what is the point!" What is the point of work, of eating, or family or the church? If this life is all there is, then what is the point and how do we go on living?

The first option is to admit that life is hopeless and all our work and accomplishments and joys are utterly meaningless. That is a gloomy place to be, a place where there are no morals, no absolute truths, no meaning, no purpose and when nothing really matters at all. That's the nihilism of people like Frederick Nietche, and despite all their protestations, that's actually where atheism resides.

You see without God there can be no ultimate meaning in life, only a meaning we decide for ourselves. Without God there are no moral absolutes, only those which we as a society agree on, and that means that we have no right to tell anyone else what is right or wrong either. And without God and without any hope of eternity, you are and I are just an accidental collocations of atoms, with as much importance as a slug or a virus. We are born, we live, we die and the circle of life goes around. That is the emptiness of a life lived "under the sun," a life lived without God.

But of course living like that, living daily with the reality that nothing we do has any meaning or lasting value is almost impossible to do, which is why so many people take option two, and pretend that there is some lasting legacy, some final profit in life.

That's how most people live today. Most people I speak to have never wrestled with questions ultimate truth and about eternity, they are just content to enjoy the ride with no idea how it's going to end. In fact most people in our country don't seem to be bothered about the ending at all! They have swallowed hook, line and sinker, Bob Marley's great reggae classic: "don't worry about a thing, because every little thing is going to be all right!"

I am constantly astonished by the level of disengagement with questions about eternity and the willingness of people to believe anything about life after death, no matter how sugar coated or Disney like they might be, as long as it makes them feel better. The fact that their eternal futures, or the eternal destinies of their loved ones, are based on ideas backed up by no evidence and that do not stand up to any kind of scrutiny or thoughtful questioning is utterly irrelevant to most people. We are becoming a nation of ultimate consumerists who don't care about truth and who are only interested what makes us feel good right now - whether that's a new car, the latest gadget, a nice house, an expensive holiday, a different partner for some personal fiction about the meaning of life.

Now of course if this life is all there is, if there is nothing more than life "under the sun" then chasing after the pleasures of this world and even dreaming up fictions about God to make us feel better and hide us from reality makes perfect sense. But the writer of Ecclesiastes does not want to leave us there. He's pointing out the pointlessness of these "under the sun" ways of living so that we won't settle for that. He knows that there is a point in life, that there is significance in life, that human beings do have eternal value and that when we live under God with eternity in view there is great joy and contentment to be found, even in the ordinary things of life. And it all comes to a head from verse 24:

“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him who can eat or find enjoyment?”

You see the true wisdom the Teacher has been seeking is the wisdom to see life as it truly is. And where does that begin? True wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, acknowledging his supremacy and his authority over his world and over us. However much our culture increasingly insists otherwise, the truly good life, a life with eternal significance and lasting value, can only be lived hand-in-hand with the God who made us and who, in Christ, gave himself for us. And what’s more, a life lived like that brings us all the things we foolishly spend our time chasing after.

So much striving after money or fame or love or achievement is about being valued, but the Christian knows that they are loved extravagantly and that their worth is not based on what they achieve, but on the value God gave them by making them in his image and then by sending Jesus to pay the price for their sin.

So many people today are thrill seekers, chasing after the next hit of happiness whether that’s by bungee jumping, drug taking, or flexing their credit cards. But whilst those things may bring a temporary high they don’t last. But the Christian has the joy of having the God who created the universe as their Father, Jesus, the one who died for them as their brother, and the Holy Spirit as their constant companion- and getting to know this triune God is a far bigger and far longer lasting thrill because it will go on for all eternity.

And so many people live today for stuff, as if the next DVD or sofa or car or house or holiday will bring them lasting happiness. But for the Christian there is not only the hope of eternal life when all the riches of the nations will belong to God’s people – that’s what verse 26 says – there is also the ability to be content now. The writer of Ecclesiastes wants us to see that life and health and strength and work and food and drink and music and all the pleasures that life brings are gifts from the hand of God. People who think that they are entitled are rarely thankful for what they have and rarely happy. But people who cherish the ordinary things in life as gifts from the hand of a loving creator God, even if they have very little, are able to find joy everywhere.

So what’s the point, what’s gained by a life dominated by pleasure or work or family or achievements? In a life lived under the sun, a life lived outside of God these things have absolutely no value whatsoever, and we are fooling ourselves if we think otherwise. But when our life is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, when we see life and all that comes with it as a gift from God, then everything we do has eternal significance.

So work becomes meaningful because we do it in the strength the Lord gives for his glory that lasts forever. Food and drink become significant because not only do we eat and drink in his presence, for he promises never to leave or forsake those who trust in him, but those times of feasting point us to the wedding banquet of the lamb – the great feast in the courts of heaven – which will last forever.

So as you head off for lunch or to spend time with family or to get ready for work tomorrow or plan your holidays for the year make sure that those things are not ends in themselves. As we’ve seen this morning, seeking after things that bring us joy for their own sake will leave us ultimately empty. But if we seek the joy bringer, then joy will follow. May that describe our lives this year and always. Amen.