

What Works Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

Introduction

Good morning! My name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. We are continuing today in our summer sermon series on the book of Ecclesiastes titled, "Getting Over Life Under the Sun". I'm sure by now you've noticed the new artwork for this series. Thanks to Hayley Moss sharing her artistic abilities, we have a sermon series graphic that's not only pretty, but casts vision.

Central to the image is the sun, which allows room both below it and above it, representing Ecclesiastes' emphasis on life under the sun and our need to lift our eyes to life over the sun, where God rules over all. Note the contrast in color between life under the sun (darker) and life over the sun ((lighter), representing Ecclesiastes' tone of the real hardships of earthly life apart from God and the tone of wise clarity of spiritual life with God when we get over life under the sun.

Today we'll be in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes with a message titled, "What Works Under the Sun". Instead of building this message around a main idea, we're going to wrestle with a big question; here it is: When it comes to finding meaning in life, what works under the sun? The author of Ecclesiastes will answer us with three things he himself came to realize: wishes won't work, wisdom won't work, and work won't work.

Rather than our usual practice of standing to honor the reading of God's word, since our passage is so long today, we're going to read it in parts as we go. Again, today's passage is Ecclesiastes 2:1-26. That's page 553 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs.

May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen.*

Exposition

Back in 2017 NFL quarterback Tom Brady led the New England Patriots to his third Super Bowl win. Not long afterward Brady appeared on the news show 60 Minutes and shared honestly about what it was like to be on top of the world. He said, "Why do I

have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what is'...Me, I think, ' . . . It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be." When the interviewer asked, "What's the answer?" Brady could only say, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."¹

Before we shake our heads in pity, whether you like Tom Brady or not, we have to admit something: we all have written some form of good news for ourselves. Something that promises to solve our problems and give us meaning. Don't deny it. It's embedded in the retina of our worldview, the sacred and undeniable truths that all men have the right to "life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness."² British pastors Steve Timmis and Tim Chester put it this way:

*Everyone has a gospel story. Everyone. Everyone has their version of salvation. They are gospel stories in that they [claim] to offer good news.*³

What's the promised land in your heart? Where do you find yourself thinking, "If I just had [this], then I would be happy"? We all have those things. And since we all have those things, one of the best things that can happen to us in life is to find out that those things won't work. They won't give us meaning in life. If Tom Brady could keep being disappointed over and over again with the letdown of all his dreams under the sun, maybe he would eventually get over them and start looking up, over the sun. What a powerful voice he would have in saying, "The things of this world we pursue are all meaningless! But I have found the answer..."

Thankfully, we don't have to wait around for him to come to that conclusion; there is one who's already done it, and the book of Ecclesiastes tells the tale. Now, whether it was written by Solomon or just *about* Solomon, his voice echoes powerfully to us from the grave. He didn't just win a few Super Bowls and marry a supermodel--he literally made it his life's work to search for happiness and meaning apart from God, experimenting with every possibility. And he could do it because he actually had access to anything he wished for.⁴ In so doing he served as a "preacher," a "collector" of reality, both to the Old Testament people of God, and now to us today.⁵

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 52

² The United States Declaration of Independence

³ Steve Timmis and Tim Chester, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*

⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, Loc 753-759

⁵ Ryken, 58

I. Wishes Won't Work - vv. 1-11

The first thing he has to teach us from chapter 2 is that in response to our question of what works under the sun to give us meaning in life, wishes won't work. Read with me beginning in verse 1:

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. Ecclesiastes 2:1

Imagine if you could think of anything your heart desired--no limits--and automatically have it. That was the preacher's *life*. And so he decided to make all his wishes come true as a *test*, to see if they would bring the happiness they promised. This was "treat yo'self"—*everyday*; complete self-indulgence. The preacher could say in the words of "The Wanderer" by U2 and Johnny Cash,

*I went out there
In search of experience
To taste and to touch and to feel as much
As a man can before he repents⁶*

And so the first wish on his list we see in verse 2:

I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" Ecclesiastes 2:2

This was an exploration of life on the lighter side; not being so serious all the time. Feeling awkward? Make a joke. Facing trouble? Get some entertainment to distract you. Finding conflict? Be sarcastic and make fun of it. You know people like that. We all can be like that sometimes. But the preacher didn't just say it fell short of making him happy; he said it was madness! Crazy. The idea is like, no one in their right mind is full of giggles at a funeral.⁷ Being serious about serious things actually shows that you're *not* crazy, that you're not hiding from reality.

Next on his list comes a barrage of wishes that he fires so fast we won't know if they hit the target or not until the end. It begins in verse 3:

⁶ Ryken, 46; U2 and Johnny Cash, "The Wanderer," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-dZvQxYX1g>

⁷ Ryken, 47

I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. Ecclesiastes 2:3

This was not the preacher heading down to the liquor store for a 12-pack of Bud Lite to forget his troubles a little while. It was just as intentional as all his other experiments, and probably included the finest wine money could buy. There's debate over whether he was just sipping or getting plastered, but either way he was exploring all the pleasure alcohol had to offer.⁸

Next on his wish list begins in verse 4:

4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. Ecclesiastes 2:4-6

The description of the preacher's great works is very similar to the description of those built by Solomon in 1 Kings 7 and 10. They were so great, in fact, that another famous monarch of that day, the Queen of Sheba, came to see them; and once she experienced it all, the Bible tells us literally, "there was no more breath in her"--it took her breath away!⁹

But the description of the preacher's great works isn't just similar to Solomon's great works in Israel--it is similar to God's great works in the Garden of Eden. There, if you remember, God had established a lush garden with all kinds of fruit trees, and instead of rain he watered them all from the earth itself, a natural irrigation of mist and rivers. And there he put the first man and woman to cultivate the garden for his glory.¹⁰ So what the preacher was doing was actually rebuilding a Garden of Eden, a paradise on earth. But notice the motivation: "*I made great works...I built houses and planted vineyards for myself...I made myself gardens...I planted...I made myself pools...*"¹¹ The difference between this place and Eden was there was no place for God; there was no forbidden fruit so no need to choose God.¹² It was all for the indulgence of the preacher.

So then he also...

⁸ Ryken, 48

⁹ 1 Kings 10:4-5

¹⁰ Genesis 2:5-15

¹¹ Greidanus, Loc 792-796

¹² Derek Kidner via Ryken, 49

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. Ecclesiastes 2:7

Very likely the reason for this was the slaves to provide the workforce for the preacher's great works, and then the livestock to provide the food for the slaves.¹³ In other words, the preacher could accomplish world-renowned work without even lifting a finger.

He also...

gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. Ecclesiastes 2:8a

1 Kings' description of Solomon's wealth tells us that he had so much gold that even his drinking cups were made of pure gold, and silver became worthless because it was as common as stone.¹⁴

He also...

got singers, both men and women, Ecclesiastes 2:8b

an extremely rare and expensive pleasure in those days. But he was not only able to enjoy them, but bring them into his own household for his personal entertainment.¹⁵

And, to let him finish his sentence, he also got...

and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. Ecclesiastes 2:8c

If we return to the story of Solomon to get a real-life example of this, we see that Solomon had "700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines."¹⁶ This meant his choice of companionship and sexual relationship among a thousand women, most of whom were princesses, which meant the most pampered of that day. If that doesn't make you envious, it's only because you've been divinely taught a better way! Much of the world would see that as the height of having it made: more money and sex than you

¹³ Ryken, 49

¹⁴ 1 Kings 10:14-29

¹⁵ Ryken, 49

¹⁶ 1 Kings 11:3; Ryken, 49

know what to do with. Surely the preacher is about to tell us how much this works! He seems to start to in verse 9:

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Ecclesiastes 2:9-10

The preacher dove in head-first to pleasure--anything he wished for. And notice this, he doesn't conclude, "It was ok." No, he says, "my heart found pleasure in all my toil". In other words, "It felt good; I enjoyed it!" The wishes of this life aren't necessarily bad things; they are meant by God to be enjoyed as gifts from his hand.

But when we seek to enjoy them apart from him, the preacher shows us what happens: "for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil." The pleasure he got *was all he got*. The idea is simple, like a child blowing bubbles. Does a child get pleasure from it? Absolutely! But for how long? Until it pops, and then it's over. When we chase our pleasures apart from God, we're doing exactly the same thing. So the preacher concludes in verse 11:

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. Ecclesiastes 2:11

The preacher spits wisdom. And maybe you struggle to relate to him because of how epic his life was. Let me ask you, can you not bring into your home a much wider array of music to be performed for you? Do you not live in a society where many of a lower class provide goods and services for you? Do you not have access to a greater harem than Solomon through internet pornography?¹⁷ My friend, we live in the last days where people are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," just like the preacher was once himself.¹⁸ When it comes to finding meaning in life, wishes will not work under the sun.

¹⁷ Ryken, 50-51

¹⁸ 2 Timothy:3:1-4

II. Wisdom Won't Work - vv. 12-17

Not only will wishes fail to work, the preacher tells us, but wisdom won't work either. Now the failure of self-indulgence we could kinda see coming--but wisdom? That seems like a good thing, right? The preacher says,

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Ecclesiastes 2:12

If this sounds a little bit repetitive...it's because it is. The preacher basically said the same thing in chapter 1.¹⁹ And even though it might be a little bit annoying, it shows us that the preacher was almost scientific about his search, pouring through his findings over and over.²⁰ In fact, he did it so meticulously that he could say with confidence that no one who came after him could ever do it any better.²¹

He continued in verse 13:

13 Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Ecclesiastes 2:13-14a

For the first time in Ecclesiastes the preacher seems a little less grouchy toward wisdom. It's like, all other things being equal, if you just compare the benefits of wisdom with the benefits of folly, wisdom is better!²² Sometimes we might say, "Ignorance is bliss--it's better to just not know." But the preacher is like, "No way--the wise person can at least see while the fool stumbles around blind." So it seems like the preacher is about to go down the path of advising us to pursue wisdom, to gain an informed, realistic perspective of life--read more books, watch more news, get more degrees. But instead he says this,

And yet I perceived that the same event [death] happens to all of them. 15 Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:13, 17

²⁰ Ryken, 58

²¹ Greidanus, Loc 809-810

²² Ryken, 60

One of the characteristics of wisdom is that you carry things out to their conclusion or outcome. So to have an informed, realistic perspective of life, there's no way around the inevitable reality of where it's headed for us all: death. We Christians are a morbid bunch. We talk about death a lot. We sing about a man who died for us, and in a few minutes we'll come take bread and wine as a way to remember and proclaim what...his death. That's not normal! Most people don't willingly dwell on death. I just got back from a place in Florida where many people retire in order to enjoy their last years in paradise, as far away from the gloom of death as possible. Why? Because dwelling on death is depressing, man!

You can live one of the most high-profile, globe-trotting, insight-gaining lives of anyone in the world, and at the end of the day you still have to go back to your hotel and lay down in the dark, where morbid thoughts are eager to join you and suffocate the light of that day's adventures. That is, in fact, just what happened this weekend when world-renowned chef and CNN storyteller Anthony Bourdain was found dead from suicide in his Paris hotel room. The reality is, when you look at life under the sun as honestly as Bourdain did, you remain aware that even Emmy's and full passports cannot overcome death.²³

And if that's not enough, the preacher gets even more depressing in verse 16:

16 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! 17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 2:16-17

Even if we were in our worldly wisdom to say, "Aha, I've figured it out--I may not be able to overcome death, but I can leave a legacy that will carry on!"--the preacher reminds us that whether wise or fool, we will all soon be forgotten. Think about it, how many of you can name your great, great, grandfather? Three or four generations, and no one will even know you existed. Let's get real--this is life under the sun. It's grievous! The preacher hated it, as any clear-thinking person would. When it comes to finding meaning in life, unfortunately wisdom won't work for us either.

III. Work Won't Work - v. 18-23

The preacher wants to go one more round with us today. He has shown that wishes won't work, nor wisdom. Now he turns to work itself. We read in verse 18:

²³ Ryken, 64

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. Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

Once again the preacher in his search for meaning has carried his work out to its end and he sees up the road ahead that ultimately he will have to let go of everything he's worked so hard for, and not only let go of it, but hand it over to someone else. And regardless of how thoughtful he is in drafting up his last will, in death he'll have no control over how the inheritor handles things, whether he or she uses it for good or blows it all in Vegas.

The preacher continues,

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. Ecclesiastes 2:20-21

These are sobering thoughts for we who so easily and naturally find our identity in our work. Picture this scenario: you've worked your whole life toward the right degrees and the best companies and the most promising investments. It's been your everything and you are richly rewarded for it. But in a simple turn of events, you are dead and all you have goes to some slacker who doesn't deserve it. So really, what you were doing that whole lifetime of labor was killing yourself in order to give a huge donation to a slacker.²⁴

This was certainly the case in the example of Solomon, who left the kingdom he had built to his son Rehoboam. How would Solomon have rolled over in his grave if he had known Rehoboam was so foolish that within just a few years he would lose nearly 90% of the entire kingdom?²⁵ This is such an evil thought that it leads the preacher to despair and hate his work. "Why even do it?!" he seems to scream:

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. Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

²⁴ Ryken, 69

²⁵ 1 Kings 12; Ryken, 69-70

Here we might say, “But preacher, I don’t care what happens with it all when I die. When I work I work for myself.” Yet he tells us, if we’re honest about it, that our workaholic lifestyle is physically and emotionally exhausting.²⁶ If we enjoy it so much, why do we long for weekends and vacations and retirement? Go ahead if you want; believe the lie that this culture feeds us, that work is the answer to meaning in life. But know you’ve been warned by the preacher: work won’t work.

Conclusion

So how then do we end this depressing message? It appears as though *nothing* works under the sun—including this passage and this sermon! Thankfully--mercifully--the preacher ends with a glimmer of light. The reformer Martin Luther even called it “the point of the whole book.”²⁷ We read in verse 24:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. Ecclesiastes 2:24a

This is a phrase we’ll return to six more times in the book of Ecclesiastes.²⁸ But after all that the preacher has said about wishes and wisdom and work, isn’t this a contradiction? Yeah, in a sense it is. And the preacher has the wisdom to grasp differing realities at the same time, as one historian describes,

*Living a good life often requires integrating a bundle of contrasts into a durable whole.*²⁹

Here’s the change that made it possible:

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? Ecclesiastes 2:24b-25

For the first time in the chapter, the preacher is moving his perspective from life *under* the sun to life *over* the sun, where God exists with all the secrets of meaning in life. Whereas before the perspective was food and drink and work apart from God as an end in themselves--in other famous words, “eat, drink, for tomorrow we die”--the perspective now is food and drink and work *from* God as good gifts, to be enjoyed in his presence

²⁶ Ryken, 70; Greidanus, Loc 830-835

²⁷ Ryken, 71

²⁸ Greidanus, Loc 639-640

²⁹ Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*, 159

with gratitude.³⁰ It is the principle that old Paul would later communicate to young Timothy:

Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. 1 Timothy 4:4-5³¹

But the idea here isn't just some agnostic gratitude as the secret to finding meaning in life. The preacher clarifies with the final results of his experiment:

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. Ecclesiastes 2:26

Don't hear the word "sinner" here as "really bad person". It is literally, "the one who misses the mark". It's any person who goes through life missing the point, gathering and collecting everything for himself or herself. That is, my friends, the nature of every single one of us. The Bible tells us very simply that we have all missed the mark.³²

Except for one, one person who hit the target. He came as a working man, and whether in a season where his work was blue collar labor or nation-wide spectacle, he found his deepest pleasure in doing it with and for God. He too was a preacher, but he didn't need to indulge himself in life under the sun to find its meaning. To return to U2 and Johnny Cash, he was the one the Wanderer was wandering for:

*Lookin' for one good man
A spirit who would not bend or break
Who could sit at his father's right hand*

This man is Jesus Christ, and he is now seated at God the Father's right hand. He's seated there because he finished his work on earth when he died and rose again for every one of us who miss the mark. He is the secret to finding meaning in life. When we see how big and beautiful he is, all of our life can be oriented toward him. And in him we find that *what works under the sun is working under the Son*. Trusting in his finished work, not our own, *is our work*, so to speak.³³ And there we find meaning in the work of our hands. As Martin Luther once said, "[Our] entire world [becomes] full of service to

³⁰ David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*, 599; Greidanus, Loc 847-850

³¹ Ryken, 72-73

³² Romans 3:23

³³ John 6:28-29

God, not only the churches but also the home, the kitchen, the [garden], the office, and the field.”

Church, let us come as weary workers to him this morning. On the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is the answer to our search for meaning in life.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you’re a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you’re a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you’re not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let’s pray.

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