

“What Does a Man Gain?” Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 (October 2, 2016)

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”
¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ 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. 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. ⁷ I 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. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

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. 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.

¹² 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. 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. And yet I perceived that the same event 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. 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.

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.

PRAY

When I first became a pastor twelve years ago, the big book everyone was buying, the book all the churches were organizing studies around, was *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Every church back then was doing some variation of the 40 Days of Purpose study, and it became one of the fifty best selling books of all-time.

Why was that book so successful? Because everyone desperately needs to feel like their lives have meaning and purpose. Human beings are the only creatures on the planet who wonder about the meaning of life. Other animals are troubled about certain aspects of existence (hunger, predators,) but we are worried about existence *itself*. We need purpose. So, just to give you one example, a physician in one particular nursing home persuaded the administrator to bring in dogs, cats, parakeets, a colony of rabbits, and even a bunch of egg laying hens to be cared for by the residents. As a result, the residents began to come to life. People who the doctors had believed weren't able to speak started talking. People who had been completely withdrawn and non-ambulatory started coming to the nurses' station and saying, "I'll take the dog for a walk." Consequently, the use and need for psychotropic drugs for agitation dropped 62 percent. Deaths fell fifteen percent. Why? They'd given the residents purpose.

We all need meaning in our lives, we all need to feel good about ourselves somehow, and in Ecclesiastes the Preacher (that's the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, probably King Solomon from Israel's history) examines how almost everyone on earth tries to find meaning and purpose: through "gain". The Hebrew word translated as "gain" is *yitron*; it's used in verses 11 and 15 of chapter two. You might also translate it as "profit."

In other words, we try to find meaning and purpose in our lives through building a life for ourselves such that we create at the end of it or, even better, at some point early on in it, a product, a profit, that we can be proud of or take some kind of comfort in. And that sense of pride and comfort, we think, will give our lives purpose, significance.

In our passage for today, though, the Preacher works carefully through the main ways humans have always sought gain and shows us how they won't work, and how if we seek to find our purpose and meaning in them we will ultimately find we are only "chasing after the wind." What could be more futile, more ridiculous, than thinking you could catch the wind?

Two points: first, the impossibility of "gain." Second, the chance we have for joy.

First, the impossibility of "gain". The Preacher examines three big ways we try to "gain" from this life in chapters one and two. And here's what I want you to know as we begin: all of us, without exception, are constantly tempted to find our reason for living in one or more of these areas the Preacher sets out.

First, the Preacher looks at wisdom. That's verses 12-18. The Preacher applied himself to wisdom, and if the author of Ecclesiastes is Solomon, that means that, according to the Bible at least, the Preacher was the wisest man who ever lived. 1 Kings 3 tells us that no one before or since Solomon has had a more wise, discerning heart than him.

But what does he say about his wisdom? The Preacher says in verse 15: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." Then in verses 17-18: "And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. ¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." The Preacher says that the wiser you get (and wisdom doesn't mean intelligence, it doesn't mean what we might derisively call "book smarts;" it means really knowing how to live life – knowing how this world works, how people work), the sadder you get. Wisdom doesn't not lead to gain, it leads to sorrow, because in wisdom your eyes are opened, and you are forced to sort of walk in their shoes and see how painful life can be, and in some sense share in their grief. You can't gain, because the wise die just like the fool. Under the sun, you really do live and learn, then you die and forget it all.

And it isn't just Christians who view wisdom this way. Probably, in more non-traditional circles in our country today, more politically liberal, the wisest person who ever lived is thought to be Buddha, not Solomon. And Buddha was certainly wise. Remember his story? For 49 days he sat under a fig tree, meditating, trying to find the meaning of life. Then he achieved Enlightenment, and he said all people who are truly wise will recognize Four Noble Truths about life, the first of which is this: life on earth is full of *dukkha*, pain and suffering, and it is impossible to find joy in this "mundane world" as Buddha called it. Buddha and Solomon would have found much agreement if they'd ever met.

You can't find "gain" from wisdom. The great philosophers of history agree. So, second, Solomon tried pleasure. Ecclesiastes 2:1: "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.'" We read in verse 2 that he cheered his heart with wine. In verse 8 we read he had "many concubines." 1 Kings 11 tells us Solomon had a harem of three hundred concubines. Wine, women, and then verse 10a: "And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure ..."

Solomon was the king, he had virtually unlimited resources, and this says he devoted them all to finding satisfaction in sensual, fleshly pleasure. But it, too, was all vanity, a chasing after the wind. It did not provide him with satisfaction or fulfillment.

Now none of us will have the ability to test the limits of pleasure like Solomon did, but almost all of us have enough disposable income to try and live for pleasure. None of us are peasants, living in thirteenth century Russia, so all of us can manage to get our hands on a glass of wine at the end of the day, or bourbon, or a big bowl of Rocky Road ice cream. Almost all of us have the resources to buy a comfortable chair and create a home entertainment system that would have made even Solomon a little jealous, and on that home entertainment system we can basically watch and listen to whatever we might want, for hours and hours at a time. Many of us (not most, but many) have the resources to go to every game we want to go to, to travel virtually anywhere we want, hunt wherever we want, and shop whenever we choose. To some degree we can try and live for pleasure.

The Preacher wants you to know this: those pleasures, while they all may be innocent in and of themselves, *if you start looking forward to them too much* are in fact addictions waiting to happen. You can, obviously, get addicted to bourbon. But you can get addicted to ice cream and shopping and even watching your favorite programs in your favorite chair. You'll know you are addicted when you get angry and yell at your family when you can't sit in your chair and enjoy your shows in peace and quiet. You'll know you're addicted to Ole Miss football when you start cursing the Rebels and their coaches when they don't play well.

What's going on? You've started counting on those things to make you happy, you feel like you need them to bring you up, when it doesn't happen you're miserable: *that's an addiction*. Pretty soon, you don't really find enjoyment in it anymore. It's just the act itself. You'll find, as Jenny Lewis puts it in one of her songs, no matter how good the highs might feel "the lows are so extreme that the good seems [incredibly] cheap, and it teases you for weeks in its absence."

You can't "gain" from pleasure. So, third, the Preacher tried accomplishments, work; career. Ecclesiastes 2:4-6: "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."

Of all the things we are tempted to trust in to give our lives meaning, work might be the most seductive. But those who have reached the pinnacle of their profession testify that work can't satisfy you. Phillip Seymour Hoffman was in a ton of movies and won an

Oscar for his performance in *Capote*. He was nominated for an Oscar three other times, and nominated for two Emmys and three Tonys. He was an actor's actor, and long before his untimely death he was respected by everyone. So if it were possible for your work to give meaning to your life, Phillip Seymour Hoffman would have had it.

But in a *Rolling Stone* magazine interview from several years ago, he said, "Life is only as good as the day you do your work well. You're working and you do good work. But how you feel after that moment is the satisfaction you carry with you. And it's as satisfied as [you're ever going to] get..." In other words, the feeling of satisfaction never lasts. For a day or two at best you'll feel like you matter, that you've arrived, but then the question returns: am I really all that good? So you have to go back to work to prove yourself, and it starts all over again. You never find the fulfillment you're looking for.

You say, "Well, that's an actor. Actors are kind of frou-frou and overly sensitive." Philip Seymour Hoffman was actually not frou-frou at all, but OK ... Paul "Bear" Bryant, longtime football coach at Alabama. A man's man. When it came to football in the South, he was it. He gave an interview the last year he coached, in 1982, and this is what he said: "I've had a full life in one respect, but I've had a one-track deal in another respect. Whether it's been good, I'll never know. That'll be decided by wiser men later. My life has been so tied up in football that it has flown by. I wish it wasn't that way, but it has gone by mighty fast. Practice, recruiting and games. Football, football, and more football. There hasn't been much else ... [and f]rankly, I don't know if that's good. I know I've made the journey, but I'm not sure I enjoyed all of it. You miss a lot of things you shouldn't miss... you never know if it has been worth it..."

The Preacher says, "It's not worth it." If you try to "gain" from life through your work, then you'll only be as good as your last movie, your last football game, your last sale, your last patient, or your last sermon. So the Preacher says, "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.

And just in case someone says, "I find fulfillment in my family – my marriage, my kids. That's how I gain from this life" – what do you think that is but another form of work? A great family that you can be proud of takes a tremendous amount of work! And if you do try to build your meaning for life on your family, one of two things will happen: you will put such pressure on your kids, you will try so hard to mold your kids into your image, that they will either be crushed by the weight of your expectations or they will resent you.

Or, second, one day your family will let you down, and you'll be devastated. When we lived in Starkville before we moved to Oxford five and a half years ago I got to meet two widows. They were friends, and I met one of them about a year before I met the second. And within ten minutes of meeting the second widow, she launched into how much she missed her husband. For a good ten minutes she talked about how her husband had this important job and how they did everything together in the community and everyone knew them both, but now he's dead and she didn't know what she was going to do without him.

And after she left, I went to the other widow – the one I’d known first – and I remarked, “Wow – she’s really hurting. How long has her husband been dead?” I thought it had been a few weeks. The other widow said, “Brother J.D., it’s been three years, and I don’t know what to say anymore when she keeps going on about how much she misses her husband. I miss my husband, too, but I’ve tried to keep going and she hasn’t.” What happened? She’d worked, and worked, and worked to find meaning in her family, and when it fell apart she fell apart. The Preacher doesn’t want that to happen to you, so he goes to great lengths in chapters one and two to prove you can’t find “gain” in this life.

Second, the chance we have for joy. Finally, at the end of chapter two, we see for the first time a ray of light in the book of Ecclesiastes. “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?” Ecclesiastes 2:24-25.

What? Is that a contradiction from everything the Preacher has been saying in chapters one and two? He’s been talking about how these things are all chasing after the wind, but now he says there is nothing better that a man should enjoy them? Is that a contradiction? And the answer is absolutely not.

When our oldest child was a little boy, a toddler, when he first started sleeping in a big boy bed, I would climb in with him and read him the children’s book *Are You My Mother?* I probably read it to him two hundred times – every night for months. The story, in case you don’t remember it (or, if you’ve done your best to block it out of your mind), is about a baby bird that hatches while the mother bird is off looking for food. The baby bird immediately starts asking, “Where is my mother?” And then he climbs out of their nest, walks around, and finds a kitten, then a hen, then a dog, then a cow, and finally a steam shovel and he asks them all, “Are you my mother?” “Are you my mother?”

We are just like that bird, because here’s what we do: we go up to work, we go up to marriage or children, we go up to various forms of pleasure (sex, recreation, hobbies), we go up to popularity and money, and we say, “Are you my savior? Are you my savior?”

Every one of us are fundamentally restless creatures who desperately need affirmation, who desperately need a sense that we matter in the world, our lives are important, and everything will be alright. So we go up to these things and say, “Are you my savior? If you’ll save me, if you’ll make me feel good about myself and convince me that I matter, I’ll do whatever you say. I’ll give you everything. I’ll work my fingers to the bone for you. Just be my savior.”

Do you see how you’ve done that time and time again in your life? Do you see that’s why so many of you have been so desperate, needy, and weird in your relationships with the opposite sex? Do you see that’s why some of you are so terrified something is going to go wrong with your kids? Do you see that’s why some of you can’t stop working,

even though your wife is begging you to be home more? Do you see that's why some of you in college or just out of it can't commit to anyone or anything, because you're afraid that if actually set some serious life goals it will hinder your pursuit of pleasure?

It's no contradiction when the Preacher goes from talking about how these things are all chasing after the wind, then to saying there is nothing better that a man should enjoy them, because all he's saying is that while *wisdom, pleasure, and work are wonderful things to enjoy, they are horrible saviors*. They can't save you. They will either fail you or you will fail them. You can't find any "gain" from them.

The Bible says there is only one Savior. "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.

The Hebrew word translated as "sinner" is a word that literally means "to miss the mark," like an arrow shot that doesn't hit its target. The Preacher is not saying in verse 26 that God has made up his mind to give gifts to the good people, the morally upright people, and curse the bad people. Not at all. He's simply saying this: if you don't see that there is no possibility for you to "gain" from this life, you've missed the mark. You've missed the whole point of Ecclesiastes, and God can't save you if you are a bound and determined to make something else your savior.

But in Jesus Christ, God became a man, and *that man did not miss the mark*. He was perfect; he did not live for wisdom, pleasure, or work, but for God. Yet, his life was *hard*. It was anything but easy and comfortable. He was born into poverty, he was a homeless adult, and at the end of his life he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, ate his last supper in a borrowed room, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. He was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.

And on the cross he took, once and for all, the punishment we deserve for our sins. That's the life we deserve, because we have all tried to make saviors out of the things of this life, but Jesus took it for us. You've done wrong, you deserve to be punished, but out of love Jesus took that punishment and, if you will just look to Jesus, *he will save you*. This is what I mean: the sense of purpose, the sense of "I'm important, and I have significance" all find their answer in Jesus. You're looking for someone to tell you matter, but if Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, thinks you're wonderful, then I don't care what the rest of the world thinks, *you're wonderful*. If you are important to Jesus, the King of the universe, then you are important. If Jesus says you are significant, then you are significant. *Nothing else matters if Jesus says you matter*. In Jesus you'll find the purpose and meaning you've spent all your life looking for. And, if that happens to you you'll be saved – saved from a miserable, burned out, disillusioned life trying to find saviors where there are none. That's salvation.

In addition, God will **give** you wisdom, pleasure, and work, and the Preacher says, he will enable you *to enjoy them*. But can we really trust God to give us good gifts? That's what

I thought for a long time: if I do really place my faith in God and trust him, what if he makes my life miserable? What if I entrust my life to God and he refuses to give me a wife and children? What if I entrust my life to God and I wind up poor and alone and without friends, and what if he makes me a missionary to some jungle in New Guinea and that's where I die? I don't want that!

Listen, that is not how God operates. He does not save you so that he can make you miserable. He gave you his only Son; why would he want you to be miserable? "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:9-11.

Now, I can't tell you, and no one can, when God will give you these good things. Some of you, I'm sure, are Christians and you've been waiting a long time for some gifts you really, really want. But you can be sure of this: he will give the gifts of wisdom, pleasure, and satisfying work (either a job or family or both) to you in just the right proportion, at just the right time, and *so that you can truly enjoy them*. There have without a doubt been times in my life that I've wanted certain things badly, good things, but if I'd gotten them then they would have only hurt me, or I would have hurt them. God is wise enough to wait until the right time, and then he will give you the gifts.

And when God does give them to you, you will not have to live for them. You will not be devastated if something happens to them, nor will you have to try and control or possess them. No more worry, no more grasping, no more fear, no more addiction. The pressure's off, because God is the Savior, and he's in control.

All religions have come to the same conclusion as the Preacher when it comes to "gain" in this life. This isn't a uniquely Christian insight; others have seen the problem. *But the Christian answer to the problem is unique*. Eastern religions say, "Life on earth is an illusion, so you must ignore it." Western religions have tended to say, "Life on earth is gross. The body is the prison-house of the soul. So you must deny the body." The monastic movement said, "Life on earth is too distracting, so must renounce it." Some other branches of Christianity say, "Life on earth is too tempting, you might sin, you might get led astray, so you must suspect all of it." Some of you grew up in churches like that. Then there's the modern world, which says, "Life on earth is all there is, so you must control it. You must master it." Ignore it, deny it, renounce it, suspect it, control it.

But biblical Christianity has always said, "Life on earth is gift from God, so enjoy it." Some of us are so worried about the gifts: we can't stop worrying about our kids, our jobs, our money, our pleasures, our plans. We are terrified of what might happen to them. But don't you see? *All these things are a gift from God*. Do you really think God would give you gifts only to let you be dashed to pieces by what might happen to them? Relax. Our God is a God of grace. Repent, right now, of your worry and your control and your grasping, repent of the things you know have become addictions, and let's ask God together to teach us how to enjoy the life he's given us. PRAY