

Toppling our idols

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[0 : 0 0] Now let's turn in our Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and we're going to read from verse 12 to verse 26. And today we're going to think about how the teacher of Ecclesiastes helps us to begin to topple some of our idols.

So Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and at verse 12. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness. But I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself, the fate of the fool will also overtake me. What then do I gain by being wise? I said to myself, this too is meaningless. For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered. The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die. So I hated life. Because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

[1 : 1 1] All of it is meaningless. A chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun. Because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish.

Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil, into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.

For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge, and skill. And then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?

All their days their work is grief and pain. Even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness.

[2 : 1 6] But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

Amen. I wonder if we are familiar with the idea of achievement addiction. I was reading a short article from an employment counselor this week, and she was talking about that idea, and she was arguing that achievement is the alcohol of our time.

So she works with high-level business folks, and she says these days the best people don't abuse alcohol, they abuse their lives. Everything else is sacrificed for the sake of achievement in their particular field.

And again, she argued that an achievement addict is no different from any other kind of addict. And so how this looks in business and in the workplace is that you find people, and perhaps we recognize this in ourselves, we're living for the high of a completed project or a big sale, and you can live off that for a while, but after a time, that feeling wears off, and what happens, you're chasing after it again, but not just the same level.

You want something bigger, something more significant. An achievement addict is no different from any other kind of addict. Two realms where this achievement addiction can be a big issue are addressed here by our teacher.

[3 : 5 2] Education and employment. In our city of Edinburgh, education and employment, two avenues where people can look for their significance. And so it's good for us that, again, our teacher returns to focus on these two topics.

Because wisdom and work can become idols to us. What do we mean when we talk about idols and idolatry? Well, if something provides our sense of security and satisfaction, and it's not God, then that thing has become an idol to us.

If we are looking to our wisdom or our work to create a sense of pride, an inflated view of ourself, where we're thinking, well, I am somebody because I have this level, and we look down on others because they haven't reached that level, then our wisdom or our work is an idol to us.

If when we measure our lives, we say, I am someone, I have value because of what I know or what I do, or the other way around, I have no significance and I have no value because I feel like my job is worth nothing, then, again, it's a sign that we're looking to something to give to us what God is only able to give.

Our sense of identity and worth and significance are supposed to come from our relationship with God. And when we look to find our sense of self from a created thing, that has become an idol to us.

[5 : 37] So our teacher here, we've seen him, he's on a search for gain, he's on a search for ultimate happiness. In some ways, he sounds like that child who's always asking the question, but why, but why, but why?

He returns again to wisdom and to work to ask the question, is that where we can find ultimate gain and significance? Or should we look somewhere else?

as a wise king, he claims to give us the final word. And that final word that we have in this section is that since all worldly efforts are futile in giving eternal happiness, we should find our joy in God and in his everyday gifts.

gifts. Let's see how he gets us there. Beginning with the reality that there is no gain from wisdom or folly. So this is the first section, verse 12 to 16.

He's returning in his thoughts to consider wisdom. He's already taken us there in chapter 1, verses 13 and 17. Asking the question, can wisdom or can folly answer the search for something final, something absolute?

[7 : 00] Look at what he says in verse 12. He says, I turn my thoughts to consider wisdom and madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?

What's he trying to say there? He's trying to say, if anyone should know the answer to this, it's me. Because Solomon was a king who was famous for his wisdom.

His wisdom was given to him by God. We know the queen of Sheba travelled many hundreds of miles because Solomon's wisdom was world famous.

And as he searches deeply and as he probes these questions, he is confident that he is able to provide a better answer than anyone following him.

And to help in this question of do wisdom or folly provide ultimate meaning, he takes two different points of view for us. One point of view, just daily life, a day in the life, but the other point of view is from a gravesite.

[8 : 05] So in verses 13 and 14, he's considering wisdom and folly from a relative point of view. And from that point of view, he can say, I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

So wisdom is like light, folly is like darkness. It's better to have eyes that can see rather than be blind so that you are alert to danger so that you can choose the right direction.

Moral instruction is good to listen to. King Solomon would tell us, relatively speaking, wisdom is better than folly. But then, ultimately, end of verse 14, I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

Verse 16, the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered. The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise, too, must die.

So when we think about our ultimate destiny and when we realize we all share that same fate, whether we are wise or foolish, in a worldly setting, when we will die and be forgotten, when you can't take wisdom with you or you can't use that wisdom you value in the grave, we can see why the teacher says, well, actually, in the end, it makes no difference.

[9 : 33] Death is like that trump card that's played over every pleasure, that's played over the value of wisdom. There was a minister by the name of Haddon Robinson who's also written a good few books and he spoke about conducting a funeral service for a man who had a working knowledge of 34 different languages when he died.

Now, I don't know about you, but that, to me, seems mind-boggling. That is an incredible achievement, but no eternal game. We can be dazzled by wisdom and knowledge, but without God, it doesn't lead to eternal gain.

In this search for happiness, death brings that sudden stop. And so, our teacher will say, wisdom is meaningless or vanity.

It's like that morning mist. It's short-lived. You cannot hold on to it. And most of all, it cannot save us in the end. And so, the wisdom of our teacher makes us reflect.

Am I basing my sense of self, my sense of security, on my knowledge and wisdom? Or does my hope lie in the fact that I know my God?

[10 : 59] Am I consuming the information and the knowledge of this age, but ignoring the wisdom of God? We have an invitation in our own lives to follow the example of this teacher, assess our lives on the basis of our day-to-day, think about the wisdom that we live by, but also go to the day of your death.

Are we wise towards God? Do we know God? That's the only wisdom that counts in the end. So our teacher can say there's no gain from wisdom or folly.

And then he turns in verse 17 to 23 to say there's no gain from work. Verse 17, So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it is meaningless. A chasing after the wind. So our teacher King, he knows the toil of work.

Of course, his situation is different than ours, thoroughly different than ours. We do not exercise a kingly role. We are not controlling a nation.

[12 : 11] But he too in that elevated position felt the burden of work. The Bible teaches us that God gave to Adam and Eve to humanity work as a good gift.

But since in Genesis chapter 3 we read about this Adam and Eve turned away from God and his word choosing their own path the earth was cursed.

there were those thorns and thistles which means for us work comes with exhaustion and frustration. It comes with pain attached. So we were made for it but now it's been spoiled by the fall. And so our teacher who knows that then leads us to the conclusion well in that case work is the wrong place to look for your ultimate sense of meaning and significance. And again because it's all done under the sun.

Verse 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. That under the sun repetition in Ecclesiastes becomes something of a time marker reminding us of eternity beyond death.

[13 : 27] So again to help us to follow his conclusion he considers both working life and the end of life in these few verses.

We'll think about first of all how he speaks about the nine to five in verses 22 and 23. What language does he use to describe work? Just listen to it again.

What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain.

Even at night their minds do not rest. I wonder if we can relate to that. Maybe it's the anxiety of having an uncertain job future or uncertain finances.

Perhaps we know in our workplace the pressure of being under staffed or under resourced for our role. Perhaps we have known grief and pain from our colleagues or grief and pain because we've been asked to do unethical things in the workplace.

[14 : 45] Have you found your work making it difficult for you to sleep? Your work making it difficult to leave it at the office so you come home and you're distracted and unable to fully engage with the people in your life because of the consuming burden of work.

Our work is a gift from God and it causes us to groan. Both those things are true and both these are recognized by our teacher.

So that's in the context of the nine to five but again he takes us to our destiny verses 18 to 21. From the point of view of the day of our death what does he say there?

Verse 18 again I hated all the things I toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me and who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish.

Just as we cannot take our possessions with us we cannot take our work with us it will at some point be handed over to somebody else and the other person may do a brilliant job of it or may wreck it all.

[15 : 59] And actually we just need to think about King Solomon's own life to realize this happening. So King Solomon would pass his kingdom on to his son Rehoboam and Rehoboam through his folly would lose ten of the twelve tribes.

I think if we think even in terms of retirement we begin to get a glimpse into the wisdom of our teacher.

For some retirement has already happened for others it's approaching. You come to retirement and you may get the gold watch, the nice pen, the lump sum payout. But there are lots of losses also. Someone else will come and will take over your work and they will likely change your systems. They will do things their own way. They will take over your desk, your office, they may take over your company.

And that is for better or for worse. And either way we have no control over that. And that's just retirement. It's much more final when we think about our day.

[17 : 12] And so the teacher wants to remind us again of, in that sense, the curse associated with work. There is too much strain for too little gain.

To help us to see that we need more than work to give us ultimate significance and happiness. As our teacher has been thinking about wisdom and folly has been thinking about work, did you notice in verse 17 and 18 the language of hate.

A strong language, very striking language in the middle of this section. And what's happening there is that our teacher is hating what has become of Eden.

The world as God intended it to be. This isn't cynicism or blind despair. This is the lament of a wise king.

When he says in verse 17, so I hated life because the work that's done under the sun was grievous to me. This is an ache for the way in which the world is broken and for the way that that impacts us in so many ways.

[18 : 29] So let's just turn our minds for a moment back to the Garden of Eden to think about what wisdom and work looked like then. Wisdom in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve was knowing and enjoying life with their God.

Gladly submitting to and obeying their God. Enjoying the privilege of being made in the image of God and ruling under God for him and enjoying his presence.

And work in that setting was gift. And work in that setting was also an act of worship. It was duty but it was also delight.

But here our teacher is coming from a different perspective. He's coming from the under the sun perspective. Coming from the imagine if you think there is no God and you live without God in your life perspective and then when you face death there's real sadness because of all these losses. All that we do not take with us. Losses because we are east of Eden. We've seen it a few times the sense of discontent that is present.

[19 : 46] To remind us again of chapter 3 in verse 11. God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

We are longing for, we are made for permanence and stability. But when we look for that sense of permanence and stability in what we know and in what we do we will only be disappointed.

Death comes as the ultimate game over. And our teacher is trying to show us this. We strive for wisdom, we strive for work but they do not in the end save us.

And so he wants to show that sense of discontent but he also wants to let God's light in. verses 24 to 26.

It's the first break in our book, first major section completed, first time the light of God really breaks in for us. Sometimes reading Ecclesiastes you can feel like you're in the darkness.

[20 : 56] I don't know if you've ever been caving or potholing but if you find yourself caving you will find yourself underground for hours at a time and confined spaces, it can be painful, it can be exhausting and after a while you're just desperate to see even just a glimpse of natural light well here is light in Ecclesiastes and why is there light all of a sudden?

Because we're reminded of the reality of God because God is introduced because now we're being pointed away from these small idols of work and wisdom to the one true God now we're being directed beyond life just under the sun thinking on the horizontal to lift our eyes to remember the one who created and is above the sun and he's leading us to walk in the light of faith so as we look

at this little section three wisdom choices to make in the light of this text one we are invited to choose to enjoy God's ordinary gifts today to live for today to enjoy God's gifts today verse 24 and verse 25 a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil this too I see is from the hand of God for without him who can eat or find enjoyment work is not a God to serve but work is a gift from

God to enjoy so is food so is drink one of the American presidents Roosevelt said far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing now as Christians we would say that the greatest thing is to know God through faith in Jesus but we recognize that God has given work as a gift it's important that we understand why we work and how we work we're not working to establish a sense of self we are not invited to work to boost our pride we are not invited to work simply to pay our bills rather we work with an awareness of God we work with a sense of thankfulness that God has given me this work this task to do whether our work is paid or unpaid it is an opportunity for us to be faithful to our

God to be a blessing to others in the way that we serve and if we're paid in the money that we get that we can bless others God's word gives us a new lens through which to view our work reminding us that we go to work with God and we go to work for God I think Paul put it really helpfully in Colossians 3 verse 23 and 24 whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord not for human masters since you know that you will receive an inheritance from a Lord as a reward it is a Lord Christ you are serving so the author the teacher of Ecclesiastes says work is a gift food and drink are a gift so practically speaking I imagine for many of us we grew up and we practice the saying of grace before our meals and that's a good thing it reminds us

God gave us these things God gave us the resources to have these things do we say grace for our work too do we go to our workplaces or do we sit at our desk with a sense of thankfulness for being able to serve God and to serve others in the way that he has called us to we need to choose to enjoy the everyday gifts of God in the way that God intended and we can go wrong in that I enjoy a game of tennis and I enjoy oranges when you think about tennis and oranges you're supposed to have them as a wee half time refreshment but if you choose to make an orange a tennis ball it will not go well you will end up with a mess we are supposed to use God's gifts properly not to make them into

[25 : 33] God's for us food and drink and work are good gifts and we should take real pleasure in them but the problem for us comes that often we hunger for more from them than they were ever designed to give it's that problem of idolatry that keeps creeping in again to help us to remember 1st Corinthians 10 31 whether you eat or drink or whatever you do do it all for the glory of God not sell now we thought a number of times about Matthew chapter 6 where Jesus says don't store up treasures on earth but treasures in heaven for where your treasure is your heart will be also have that perspective the wisdom that we find in Ecclesiastes holds two realities together all of life is like a mist life is short compared to eternity and even as we recognize life is like a mist and sometimes that's really difficult and confusing joy is possible and good as Dickens would say it is both the best of times and the worst of times second wisdom choice choose to honor

God today verse 26 to the person who pleases him God gives wisdom knowledge and happiness but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God there is the contrast here of the two ways to live person one lives to please God chooses to live under the mercy of God chooses to honor God pleasing God in faith and trust and worship and enjoying God's gift and the result God gives wisdom knowledge and happiness that happiness which is not just temporary but is eternal when we're in right relationship with God but then there's the other way to live the way of the sinner who chooses to live without God God is not the solid rock that life is built on Jesus is not the center around which our life orbits and the result is loss and no gain just as Jesus said in that parable in Luke 19 to everyone who has more will be given but as for the one who has nothing even what they have will be taken away our teacher reminds us of total loss that we might by

God's grace topple those idols that would seek to replace God in our hearts so that we would serve and worship him only which takes us to our last piece of wisdom wisdom choice three choose to rest in the wisdom and work of Jesus because ultimately that's the one work we all need it's the work of Jesus John chapter four verse thirty four Jesus said my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work Jesus came to do the work of God Jesus came to perform the work of the suffering servant read the gospels and you discover Jesus toiling under the sun you discover

Jesus tears under the sun as he came to a world of poverty as he was not believed in by many as he was rejected by many as ultimately he would go to the cross to be punished for us to be pierced for our transgressions to be crushed for our iniquities that his father made him a sin offering that was his work the work that he completed those toil toils and tears of Jesus would then on the third day give way to triumph in his resurrection the work of Jesus the work of salvation is a completed work and because of that

Jesus says there's only one work that we need the one work that we need is to believe in Jesus to have our faith in Jesus to ask him to forgive our sin to be our Lord and Savior the one wisdom we need is the wisdom of God who is Jesus 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 Paul is full of that language he says that Jesus is for us wisdom from God that is our righteousness holiness and redemption Jesus Christ crucified is God's wisdom for our salvation it's not the wisdom of the world but it's the wisdom of God the only way for us to be saved and knowing that truth knowing this Jesus that's what frees our hearts from captivity to those idols where we're not thinking that our wisdom and our work is all that we need it's knowing

Jesus and his finished work and the wisdom of God that's what gives us the lasting eternal happiness that we're seeking so the teacher in Ecclesiastes he's trying to help rescue us from an achievement addiction which we can all suffer from thinking that our meaning significance and worth comes from what we know or what we do he says to us remember that doesn't last and it doesn't save and we're invited in God's word to look instead to Jesus the great teacher to his great work his great wisdom to trust in his achievement and bringing salvation and eternal life understanding that is the only place it's the right place and the only place to find our identity so let's pray in light of that Lord God we recognize how easy it is to want to build our life on what we know or what we do that we can find our sense of value and self worth from our degrees or from our job from our responsibilities

[32 : 24] Lord help us to understand that while those are good things they are not ultimate things help us to live in light of our own death and in light of eternity and help us to trust in and rest in the work and the wisdom of the Lord Jesus that we be so grateful that on the cross he cried out it is finished everything necessary for our salvation had been done and all we need to do is to ask him to be our Lord and saviour and so we pray that he'd help each one of us to be looking to him as saviour so then we'd be able to approach each day in the right way to enjoy our food and drink and our family and our work as good gifts to be thankful and to use them well we pray for your wisdom and your help and we pray in Jesus name amen now we'll finish with the hymn that comes from the book of revelation but I think in many ways helps us to reflect on some of the brokenness that we keep returning to in

Ecclesiastes is he worthy so let's stand and let's sing together there do