

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26

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Preacher: Joe Pace

[0:00] And welcome again to Christ Church Chicago.! We're so glad that you're here. It starred Motown icon Diana Ross, and then African-American heartthrob Billy Dee Williams.

The movie itself was a box office flop. It tried to follow up on the success of their previous Oscar-nominated movie, *Lady Sings the Blues*.

It didn't work. The film actually became more famous for its theme song than for the actual movie itself.

The song, simply titled *Theme from Mahogany*, became a number one hit for Diana Ross. Its opening refrain asks this profound question.

Do you know where you're going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you? Where are you going to?

[1:36] Do you know? That indeed is the question many of us, maybe many of us in this room today, have spent a lifetime trying to answer as we pursue meaning, purpose, respect, value, happiness.

Year after year on the hamster wheel of life, looking for that thing or the next thing that's going to put us on top and give us satisfaction.

Are you still looking? Are you like the Rolling Stones and can't get no satisfaction? Though you try and you try and you try?

Well, you're in good company this morning because the preacher in our text has embarked upon the same journey that many of us have in this room.

Looking in every way possible for fulfillment and satisfaction in life, forgetting that we are short stay visitors here, not permanent residents.

[2:42] As we heard last week, we keep searching for that thing and that thing is fleeting, temporary, elusive. A vapor. It doesn't last.

The preacher this morning invites us to learn from the bitter disappointment of his own experience. In his quest for meaning, the preacher tried to find lasting gain in wisdom, pleasure and work.

Does that sound familiar to anyone? But instead of finding satisfaction in success and significance, the preacher discovers this incredible fact that really encapsulates my point this morning.

He discovers that everything is just not enough. That's the thought this morning. Everything is just not enough.

Now I can see you thinking. Boy, this sermon is going to be depressing. But before you check out on me, let me give you this piece of good news right up front.

[3:58] Though the preacher is going to have some hard things to say. He's going to give us some tough medicine and he'll do a great job in our text this morning of bursting our bubbles and bringing us back to reality.

This is ultimately not a message of gloom. But an invitation to surprising joy.

Instead of chasing after what we hope will give us some future happiness that will ultimately not last, we can have joy now even in our toil under the sun.

Earthly joys can point us to the one who can satisfy us. The preacher will show us how.

Let's follow him now on his journey as he basically runs three grand experiments or tests. He runs these tests to find if there's anything on earth that has lasting value.

[5 : 05] He's trying to make sense of life. Is there anything that will bring fulfillment and meaning in life? You're going to see that these experiments may not be so different from the experiments we run today.

These experiments fall in three main areas. As I mentioned, wisdom, pleasure and work. The preacher begins with wisdom, knowledge, education.

Will that be enough? Verse 13 of chapter one, I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

The scope is breathtaking. He wants to conduct a comprehensive and thorough search. He wants to look at everything, including folly, says verse 17.

He's looking under every rock, no stone unturned. This is an admirable quest in many ways. It's what lies at the heart of our educational system, our universities and bodies of higher knowledge.

[6 : 19] There's great prestige and value in becoming an authority in your field. Many of them sit right here in this church. We have schools and libraries and bookstores that are all a part of this quest, and it is a good one.

Learn from every scholar, every guru. Read every book. Watch every documentary. Try on different worldviews. There is value in this approach.

In chapter two, verse 13, he says, then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. It's not like wisdom and learning is bad.

But the preacher's experiment fails for three reasons. First, some things are just inscrutable, meaning no matter how much wisdom we have, we won't be able to figure some things out.

That's what he means when he says in verse 15, what is crooked cannot be made straight and what is lacking cannot be counted. In other words, there are unsolvable problems and things we can't know.

[7 : 40] There will always be some aspects of life that will remain a mystery no matter how hard we try to understand them. There are some things knowledge just can't fix.

For example, you can take all of your knowledge of gravity and climb on top of this dome. And if for some reason you happen to slip and fall, all your knowledge of gravity is not going to help you.

Because your knowledge of gravity is soon going to meet the reality of gravity and there's going to be a problem. There's a second reason this experiment fails.

More knowledge produces more frustration and anxiety. Look at verse 18 for in much wisdom is much vexation and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

The picture he paints is that of irritation or frustration verging on anger. You've heard the saying ignorance is bliss. Human wisdom sees this sad state of affairs, but is helpless to change it.

[9 : 00] Knowledge opens our eyes to the world's problems, but is unable to fix all that is broken and wrong. Even the genius Albert Einstein said, the more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know and the more powerless I am to do anything about it.

Third reason this wisdom experiment fails is because the preacher discovers that wisdom is powerless in the face of death.

After comparing those who were wise to those who were foolish up in chapter 2 verse 12, he says at the end of verse 13, and yet I perceive that the same event happens to all of them and will to me also.

He's saying that the wise and the fool ultimately end up in the same place. Both will die.

Death is the same event that happens to all of them. Death is the great equalizer. We will all die whether we have a PhD or a GED.

[10 : 18] The wise man and the fool alike will finally fade away and be forgotten. Chapter 2 verse 16, for of the wise is 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. So frustrated with this experiment, the preacher says in verse 17, so I hated life.

Please notice carefully he doesn't say so I hate life. But I hated life. This is not his final conclusion or even his present outlook. But it was his attitude when his pursuit of wisdom turned out to be empty, pointless, fleeting, chasing the wind.

Wisdom was just not enough. So the preacher runs the next experiment. This experiment is the experiment of pleasure.

Surely pleasure will be enough. Chapter 2 verse 1, I said in my heart, come now I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself.

[11 : 32] Then verses 2 through 8 describes all the things the preacher tried. I tried comedy and laughter. That turned out to be a joke.

I tried alcohol. I built the finest houses, gardens and pools for myself with every modern convenience you could imagine. I had money, money, money and all the possessions money could buy.

Herds of cattle, silver and gold, luxurious gifts from other kings and countries. And people serving me in every way possible. They say money can't buy you happiness.

But the truth is, most of us just don't have the resources to try this out. But the preacher did. And it still wasn't enough.

I asked my youngest son once, maybe he was 9 or 10. What do you want to be when you grow up? He said without hesitation, rich.

[12 : 40] I said son rich is not a job. He said I won't need a job because I'll be rich.

This thought still permeates much of our society today. This is exactly what our culture of consumerism tells us.

Just look for satisfaction and riches. If you see something you like, go get it. Be good to yourself. You deserve it. We dream of having it all.

But the preacher realized that the problem wasn't not having all your dreams come true. It was having them all come true and still feeling empty.

So the preacher tried more pleasures. He said I tried music. I had my own ancient live Spotify channel. Can you imagine your favorite musician or band traveling around with you everywhere you go?

[13 : 45] I'd love that. I can see it. I'd have the band play my own theme song every time I walked into the room like Rocky or something like that when I came in.

The preacher had it. The women, the parties, more partners than anyone could imagine. He had it all. In fact, verses 9 and 10 says he enjoyed more pleasure than anyone who had gone before him.

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.

He says I worked for it. I earned it. I deserve it. I'm going to go for it. And what happened? What was the result of the preacher's experiment?

Verse 11. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity and striving after the wind.

[14 : 52] There was nothing to be gained under the sun. He looked back and he thinks, well, okay, some of that was fun.

But what now do I have to show for myself? Ultimately, the return on investment was disappointing, dismal and pointless. I still have an uncertain future.

I'm still empty inside longing for purpose. Have you been there? Creating a God out of personal pleasure, comfort, diversion and distraction.

Such escapes may provide temporary relief and enjoyment, but they cannot give lasting satisfaction. Seeking more and more possessions and material worth as a means of dulling ourselves to the toils and troubles of reality.

But what happens when that anesthetic wears off? Think about it. If our worth is found in what we own, then what will our worth be when what we own is no longer found?

You need more. Church, it won't work. You can earn more, spend more, collect more, drink more, eat more, sin more, you name it, but none of these things will put meaning into your life.

The preacher had more than most of us ever will and more was still not enough. Everything is just not enough.

Well, after confronting the futility of pursuing pleasure and possessions, the preacher conducts one final experiment in our text, hard work, achievement.

Maybe working hard will be enough. This experiment doesn't start off too well. Verse 18, I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun.

[17:37] Many of us have a love-hate relationship with work. We don't like it, yet we look to work for our meaning and significance. In our culture, work is seen as the pathway to self-fulfillment, to make a name for ourselves.

Work is no longer about earning a living. Work is, it's become the center of our identity and purpose. Plot the right career moves, get in the right position, get noticed, get promoted, build a name for yourself, accomplish something.

And the preacher says, this won't be enough. Why? Well, as he begins to conduct his experiment, he comes to two stark realities.

The first is, no matter how hard you work, you can't take it with you. It's a pretty sure bet that the preacher was a type A personality.

He's like many of us today. It's easy for some of us to work, work, work, strategize, plan, skip vacations, miss out on family time, and work, work, work some more.

[18 : 52] My wife would probably say I fit into this category. Seems like the more you do, the more there is to do. You pour in tons of time, energy, and effort.

And then when you look back on all you've done, you're left wondering what was all that for? What did I really accomplish?

Brother Hackley, as a musician, I've long been a student of the history of the music industry. Back in the 50s and 60s, back in Pastor Helm's time, Chess Records, which was founded right here in Chicago, had some of the biggest names in blues and R&B; music signed to its label.

Artists like Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Etta James, and others who would become some of the most influential artists of all time. Most of them, however, died without ever receiving one royalty check for their work.

I know you say how tragic that is, but there's something about this that we all have in common. Something that the preacher realizes right up front and causes him, verse 20, to give his heart up to despair.

[20 : 17] Whether you received a royalty check or not for all your work, whether you end up being as accomplished as the preacher and accumulate great wealth or not, one day you will die.

And all you've worked for will be left to others because you can't take it with you. Secondly, you can't control it when you're gone.

Verses 21 through 23. Not only does he realize that you can't take it with you, even more frustrating is the fact that you have no control over the person who will inherit your life's work.

He says in verse 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.

Even if I'm successful, even if I build a practice, even if I build this business and I seem to the world to be a great success, what will happen?

[21 : 22] Well, I'll die and I'll have to leave it all behind and it will go to someone who didn't even work for it. Maybe they'll be wise with it or maybe they'll be foolish.

I spent my whole life in this medical practice, my whole life in this school, in this business, in this industry. And I'll die and the next person to come along will get it for nothing.

Maybe they'll build on what I've achieved or maybe they'll tear it down and squander it all. Maybe you've heard of the third generation curse.

It came from a groundbreaking 20-year study of thousands of families that found that 90% of very wealthy families lose their wealth by the third generation.

What do we get from our toil under the sun? Verse 23, the preacher says, all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation.

[22 : 34] Even in the night, his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. We suffer stress, anxiety, burnout, illness, restlessness, and sleepless nights all in pursuit of something you can't take with you and you can't control when you're gone.

Our life's work will vanish like a vapor. Don't try to find ultimate fulfillment and meaning in work.

It will disappoint and again, it will never be enough. We all want fulfillment and satisfaction. And like the preacher, we try wisdom, pleasure, and work to get it, but ultimately none of them will give us what we're looking for.

But you remember what I told you at the beginning of this message. Up to this point, the preacher has done a great job punching us in the gut, bursting our bubbles, and bringing us to sobering reality.

This is still ultimately not a message of gloom, but an invitation to surprising joy. Brother Ben, I know this may not be proper workshop protocol, but if you'd allow me right here, I'd like to amend my sermon title.

[24:01] Everything is just not enough, but God is. Verse 24 and 25, there's 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, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. Here it is, church. Here it is. For the first time in our text, God shows up.

Maybe in the middle of all these experiments, we've been missing what's right in front of us. Maybe the good things in life, food and drink and enjoyment of our work aren't meant to ultimately satisfy us, but are actually gifts from God that point us to something greater.

Gifts from God. Gifts from God. You can go to the bank and see Brother Andy about a loan.

You may get the loan and accomplish some great things with that loan, but there'll always be a cloud hanging over that money.

[25:15] The cloud is you have to pay it back. But when somebody gives you a gift, Lord help me to preach, there's no paperwork, no interest, no impact to your credit score, no penalties for late payment.

The gift is purely based on the goodness of the giver. The goodness of the giver enables you to freely enjoy the gift.

Every gift is a pointer to God's goodness. In fact, the simple provision of eating and drinking is a gift from the good God reminding us to be satisfied satisfied in him and that there can be no satisfaction without him.

The preacher is saying we can taste God's goodness even in the middle of this difficult life. Enjoy God now. I know you walk through the first part of this text and you say, I'm scared to enjoy anything.

I don't think I'm supposed to enjoy anything. but nothing could be further from the truth. God isn't upset that you like all the blessings he's given you. They're all gifts from him and all the good things God gives are meant for our enjoyment.

[26:42] The problem is when you expect them to give your life meaning and make you happy. They were never designed to do that. They can't bear the weight of the expectations you put on them.

They can't give you the fulfillment that you seek. They're meant to point us to the one who will ultimately satisfy our souls. That's the Lord Jesus Christ.

So instead of seeing these things as the ultimate marker of fulfillment we should receive them humbly as gifts from God realizing that God the giver is the ultimate infinite source of meaning and joy not the gifts.

The New Testament reflects the same attitude. 1 Timothy chapter 4 the apostle Paul says for everything created by God is good and nothing needs to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

1 Timothy chapter 6 but godliness with contentment is great gain for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world but if we have food and clothing with these we will be content.

[28 : 04] Life is meant to be enjoyed. Verse 25 says for apart from him who can eat who can have enjoyment.

he says the life of contentment is a gift from God and can only be truly enjoyed in God.

You won't find it anywhere else. C.S. Lewis once said the books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust in them.

It was not in them it only came through them. If they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols breaking the hearts of their worshipers for they are not the thing itself they are only the scent of a flower we have not found the echo of a tune we have not heard news from a country we have never visited.

It's not about the thing it's about the giver of the thing God himself preacher closes and I'm closing in verse 26 by saying for the one who pleases God 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 is also vanity and striving after the wind he's saying here life in this fallen world will only be futile and meaningless apart from a right relationship with the God who created it life under the sun without knowing God without pleasing God is vanity this is true no matter how hard you work how smart you are how much stuff you've been able to accumulate in your lifetime what does it mean to please him he says he will give all this to the one who pleases them

[30 : 22] God gives all these things well Hebrews chapter 11 answers and says without faith it's impossible to please God for the one who comes to him must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him to please God then is to trust him it's to come to him by faith if you haven't made that step today I'd love to show you after service how to get real satisfaction in your life the preacher took us on a tour this morning walking us through the palace of pleasure the library of wisdom the workshop work and accomplishment exposing the exhaustion and emptiness many of us feel because we've been trying to make created things do what only the creator can demanding from life what it was never designed to give manufacturing meaning from material things and chasing satisfaction under the sun but I challenge you this morning to lift your eyes above the

S-U-N to the S-O-N who gives true meaning joy and fulfillment and you will find just like the preacher that the soul finds rest not in having more but in knowing the one who is more more than enough more than the money more than the job more than the wisdom more than the accomplishment everything is just not enough but God is more than enough let's pray father we thank you for being the God who gives us more than enough the God who gives every good and perfect gift teach us Lord through this example of how to humbly receive that gift that we focus not on the gift itself but we focus on you the giver of that gift father allow us not to be caught up in stuff and in things that will all pass away but in you and your word who will never pass away

God we thank you for the privilege of living here and the privilege of being called your sons and daughters thank you God we give you praise we give you thanks forgive us for making idols of things and not making big things of you because it's you that matters most thank you God for being the God of more than enough yourselves you