

Happy Nomads

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Date: 05 February 2023

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 1, and we read from verse 12 right through to the end of chapter 2. The teacher was king over Israel and Jerusalem.

I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I've seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, look, I've increased in wisdom more than anyone who's ruled over Jerusalem before me.

I've experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. I said to myself, come now. I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

[1 : 03] But that also proved to be meaningless. Laughter I said is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly. My mind still guiding me with wisdom.

I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during a few days of their lives. I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.

I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well.

The delights of a man's heart. I became greater by a father than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

[2 : 06] I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor. And this was a reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless.

A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. 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 on 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 overtake me also. 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.

[3 : 11] All of it 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.

That 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 their own to another who is not told 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?

[4 : 11] 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.

This too is meaningless. A chasing after the wind. Amen. So we're looking again at the second half of Ecclesiastes 1 and through into chapter 2.

Do you have that open if you're able to? Since the mid-80s there's been an ever-increasing number of so-called digital nomads.

And that includes a particularly rapid increase in the past few years as fewer companies have required their staff to be in a particular location to work. For the digital nomad, they're freed up to travel by radically reducing their possessions.

But more importantly freed up by our connected worlds. Hence digital nomads. When everything can be accessed from anywhere, then why would you stay in one spot?

[5 : 14] The digital nomad can flit about, can rest slightly on the earth. Because everything important exists up in the cloud. It's all synchronized to global service. So park your van by the lake and get on with life.

Now for Christians, there's something of a parallel. We're not supposed to have a permanent home on this earth. The writer to the Hebrews says of Abraham, That should be the reality for us as Christians.

But the truth is, many of us are residents, not nomads. See, we should be nomadic. We should be nomadic not because everything important exists up in the cloud, but because everything important is in heaven.

That's what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6. So often the truth is that our greatest treasures are actually right here, right now.

Think about the choices that we all make, the houses that we build, the money that we spend, the things that we invest in. Annie Dillard said how we spend our days is of course how we spend our lives.

[6 : 56] What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing. It's all very well to have theoretical priorities to say something is important to us, but what are your actual priorities?

How do you spend your minutes, hours, days, and years? Does how you spend your life look any different to anyone else around you?

The book of Ecclesiastes is intended, I think, to force us to grapple with these kinds of questions. How are you spending your time and why? David Gibson argues that we often live our lives in bubbles, that we insulate ourselves from reality with a froth of something else.

And he says this section of Ecclesiastes is setting about bursting those bubbles, forcing us to grapple with reality, to stop burying our heads in the sand and see the truth.

And the bubbles that are confronted in this section, they're not easy targets, are they? It's not just saying, well, that's a waste of time and everybody knows it.

[8 : 09] No, he's taking the things that look like good candidates for meaning and then showing that there is no meaning to be found there. He examines first the possibility of wisdom and concludes seeking wisdom is chasing after the wind, 117.

And more comprehensively, 215, I said to myself, the fate of the fool will overtake me also. 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. Death is the needle that bursts these bubbles.

Death is the inescapable reality that we all face. Whether you want to talk about 4,000 weeks or 28,835 days, they will come to an end.

So what does it matter how you spend them? Well, recognizing the finitude of our days, it could drive us to despair. And that appoints that seems to be the teacher's attitude here in Ecclesiastes.

[9 : 19] It could drive us that way, or it may instead drive us to use them well, which I think is ultimately the teacher's intent. Gibson says death can radically enable us to enjoy life.

By relativizing all that we do in our days under the sun, death can change us from people who want to control life again into people who find deep joy in receiving life as a gift.

According to Gibson, the teacher here is showing us how to find real happiness. Admittedly, via a whole bunch of false starts along the way. A bunch of failed attempts to find happiness along the way to a better course.

And finding happiness ultimately is what we all want, isn't it? Blaise Pascal said, All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.

The cause of some going to war and of others avoiding it is the same desire in both, to be happy. This is the motive of every action, of every man, even those who hang themselves.

[10:32] It's quite a statement, isn't it? But is he wrong? Think about what you've done today. When you hit snooze and turned over, you were pursuing happiness.

When you ate your breakfast, you did it to avoid feeling hungry, to pursue happiness. When you spent a few minutes longer in the shower, hoping that your wife would deal with the children who you could hear fighting in the other room, you were pursuing happiness.

I may need to change my pronouns in some of these sentences. When you put on clothes, you chose the ones that would make you happy, didn't you? And the deeper things, too.

We do the things that will make us happy. Even the things that we do, knowing they'll make us unhappy in the here and now, well, we do it because we believe they'll make us happier in the long run. Why do we exercise?

I'm told some people enjoy it in the moment. I confess I'm baffled by that. But most of us, I think, exercise because we believe the doctors who tell us it will help us live longer, healthier lives.

[11:36] We're maximizing happiness. We work hard at school and university, not perhaps because we enjoy the moment, but because we want the degree that we think is going to open the doors to the happiness in the future.

And whether we're right or wrong in that belief, that's why we do it, isn't it? Even when we think we're doing something because somebody else is making us do it, well, we're doing it because the threat of what we think they'll do, if we don't, will make us less happy than the consequence of not doing it.

I butchered that sentence. I think you know what I mean. Even, even, Pascal says, the suicide. It's a profoundly sad thing. But he's right, isn't he?

But the person in that situation is tired of all the unhappiness and the pain and the misery and they want it to end. They believe nothingness would be preferable to their present existence.

We have this fundamental goal to be happy. And that brings us to the preacher's next attempt to find meaning. His exhausted wisdom as a source and so he says, chapter 2, verse 1, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

[12:56] But that also proved to be meaningless. Again, he tells us up front, this is going nowhere. But again, he lays out the extent of his exploration that none might doubt. He really has tried.

Does this work or not? And in pursuing pleasure, he begins with laughter, verse 2. Comedy's a popular means of getting by, isn't it? We feel insecure about something and we pretend it's just a joke.

We feel down about our own circumstances so we make fun of someone else. We're bored. We turn to something that will make us laugh. But the truth is, whether it's the 30-second clips on TikTok or it's the endless reruns of old sitcoms or it's the supposedly comedic banter of the quiz show host, so much of it is empty.

Froth at best. Go a little bit deeper, the more substantial comedy, if you want to call it that, well, maybe it makes us laugh for an hour, but does anything change because of it?

Does it give us meaning? Well, read the biographies of some of these comedians sometime. They don't seem to have found meaning for themselves, many of them, do they? How many of them entertain others and yet are profoundly dissatisfied and unhappy themselves?

[14:09] Robin Williams might be the most extreme example, but he's just one of many who has tried laughter and come up empty. It has proved to be meaningless. Solomon moves on, verse 3, I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom.

I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. Plenty of people have tried this one too, haven't they? Searching for meaning in the bottom of

the bottle or with the pills and the syringes.

And whilst he says, my mind's still guiding me with wisdom, I think that means he kind of stopped to analyze it after the fact, not that in the moment he stopped short of complete intoxication. No, the teacher here says he's tried out everything that alcohol has to offer and found nothing there.

Plenty of people can echo that same analysis today. A promise of freedom and happiness that turns out to be an entrapment of despair. And so he turns to a rather grander vision in the verses that follow.

He undertakes these substantial projects. We could note in passing that all these projects are actually quite self-centered. These are gardens and parks for himself, not kind of big public projects. [15:21] He increases his number of slaves in order to cater to his whims. He has the flocks and the herds that make the food to go with all the wine at his blowout feasts. And remember, this is a king.

A king with the tribute of the surrounding nations flowing in along with the taxes of his own people all into his coffers. There's no limit to what he can purchase. Nothing's stopping him from these grand projects.

Everything his heart desires. So he amasses the treasure. He hires the singers, verse 8. Then rather more, the preserve of the wealthy. And of course, in his seeking after pleasure and happiness, of course, he also establishes his harem, the delights of a man's heart.

1 Kings 11 records he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. He denied himself no conceivable pleasure. Now, we might think, we might think we don't have the opportunities to indulge our desires that Solomon, this incredibly rich king, had.

And maybe that's true to a degree. But the truth is, folks, we can dine at a larger buffet. We can buy produce from around the world in our supermarkets. We can listen to an endless variety of music at the touch of a button.

[16:36] And we may not be able to quite match his exploits in the flesh, but the internet offers us an endless harem for the imagination. We have ample opportunity to indulge our desires.

And so often, we tell ourselves, if I just had a little more, if we had the nicer house, the faster car, the partner of our dreams, the holiday, the whatever it might be, tell ourselves, if we had that thing, we would be happy.

And yet, all of our experience, the whole of human history, all of it tells us, however much we have, we are never satisfied. Greg Easterbrook's book, *The Progress Paradox*, is subtitled *How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*.

He shows we have more of almost everything today except happiness. Reichen says, in spite of our material prosperity, or maybe because of it, we still suffer from poverty of soul.

The taste of pleasure has grown our appetite for this world beyond satisfaction. Meanwhile, we are still searching desperately for meaning in life. History bears out the teacher's conclusion that he gives us in verse 10.

[17:50] I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all my hands had done, and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless.

A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. If you were here last week, you'll remember we dealt with wisdom as a source of meaning, verses 12 through 16, and so now we'll skip down to his last attempt to find meaning, verse 17 and following.

What about toil? Can hard work provide meaning? Again, it's found to be a chasing after the wind. But again, it sure feels like a legitimate line to pursue, doesn't it?

We expect that hard work will bring reward. That's one of the things that our wisdom teaches us. Hard work brings reward. Indeed, the Bible teaches us hard work brings reward.

Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler. Yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard?

[19:05] When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

Proverbs teaches us sloth is folly and hard work is wise. But the truth is that this sort of general wisdom, it's normally the case, but it's never a hard and fast rule.

And there's plenty of other parts of God's word that recognize this same tension. Jeremiah 12, for example, you are always righteous, Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice.

Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? You've planted them and they've taken root, they grow and bear fruit. You are always on their lips, but far from their hearts.

Jeremiah shows us there isn't a simple equation between hard work and virtue with prosperity. And as far as the teacher's concerned, even if there were a simple equation there, it still wouldn't be enough.

[20 : 15] Verse 18, again, we're confronted with a specter of death. However hard you work, whatever you amass, you cannot take it with you.

And who knows what the next guy will be like. That's what played out for Solomon. So great was his son's folly, he lost 10 out of the 12 tribes that made up his father's kingdom.

And the experience, meanwhile, verse 22, toil and anxious striving, grief and pain. Anxiety's a big one here, isn't it?

We're anxious about whether we'll have enough work to support our families. We're anxious about whether there will be enough hours in the day to get all our work done. We're anxious about whether our colleagues will do their part or our efforts will be wasted because they haven't done what they should.

We're anxious while we're at work. We're anxious when we should be resting. We're anxious when we should be sleeping. Verse 23, even at night, their minds, their hearts, do not rest. Rare is the person who hasn't had a sleepless night worrying about their tasks and responsibilities.

[21 : 24] Day and night, there is not rest for the weary and the worker is always weary. And it will last, verse 23, all their days.

It's not an attractive picture, is it? So what's the teacher's conclusion? I mean, we've had all these mini conclusions along the way. Summarized, this too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

We've had those mini conclusions. How do we end up? Verse 24, 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. But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

And this too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Now it seems to me that you could read verse 24 in a few rather different tones, couldn't you?

[22 : 29] Read one way, verse 24 is a note of despair. This is all there is. Why bother with anything? Read another way, it's hashtag YOLO, isn't it?

You only live once, so throw yourself into every opportunity with reckless abandon. Go to the parties, eat, drink, be merry. Just take what this life has to offer, make the most of it.

Nothing better, nothing better than to eat and drink. I don't think either of those is quite the teacher's intention here, but rather something that's maybe a middle road between the two.

Gibson's very helpful again, he puts it this way, he says, some say, eat, drink, and be merry because that's all there is. The teacher says, eat, drink, and be merry because that's what there is. God has given the good things of this world to us and they are their own reward. See, what the teachers established over these past two chapters is that the reality of death means we can't afford to expect more from these good things that we pursue than they are capable of delivering.

[23 : 45] But, if we pursue them for what they actually can provide, instead of trying to make them carry a weight for which God never intended them, then they can, in fact, be for our good.

The second sentence of verse 24 is key. This too, I see, is from the hand of God. If we stop trying to make God's gifts a means of securing gain, gain, then instead we can enjoy them as gifts.

Because, because we're fallen human beings, because we're sinful, because God's image in us is marred and distorted, then we have flawed assumptions about how the world is meant to work.

Our inclination is to take everything all around us and try and force it into some kind of order and try and use all these things as a means of achieving our own goals.

But the teacher says no. What we can do is we can find satisfaction in the things themselves. Enjoy life instead of seeking to master it.

[24 : 56] So, so stop looking to find the key to life that will suddenly unlock it and instead start living it. I think this is a freeing realization.

Jeffrey Mayers says realizing this can help you deal with life in a way that honors God. For example, don't be surprised to find yourself in a frustrating situation for which you cannot escape by means of controlling it.

Not everything can be fixed. Not everything is a problem to be solved. Some things must be born, must be suffered and endured.

Wisdom doesn't teach us how to master the world. It doesn't give us techniques for programming life such that life becomes orderly and predictable. It doesn't.

It's uncomfortable, isn't it? For those of us, and I think it's most of us, those of us who approach pretty much any situation as a problem to be solved, this is uncomfortable. But Jesus told us we should expect suffering to be part of our normal experience.

[26 : 02] So maybe it isn't such a good thing that we try to engineer suffering out of our lives at almost any cost. And the teacher ends this kind of two-chapter section that has been very me-centered.

He ends it by turning finally to consider God. Suddenly he's all over these few verses at the end, isn't he? God who's barely got a look in in two chapters.

Suddenly now he's there again and again in these closing verses. And what is he doing? He's giving gifts to those he loves. That's what we need, isn't it?

To recognize that it comes from the hand of God. See, endless enjoyment, it does not come in the box with your iPhone. If it did, why are you already considering an upgrade for it?

Enjoyment is not automatically part of sex. It is not on the clearing of your dream house. It does not ride in the passenger seat of your new car.

[27 : 09] Folks, we know what it is like to have tasted the best that this life has to offer and still be wondering what's next. The teacher tells us God has to give us enjoyment or the thing itself will leave us unsatisfied.

And the way that God gives us enjoyment in his gifts is by giving us a perspective on ourselves. So folks, there is the glimmer of hope at the end of these two rather bleak chapters places, to stop searching for the key to life and start living it, to enjoy the gifts of God's grace.

Let's pray. Lord our God, we pray that you would give us the wisdom to understand the implications of these parts of your word, to see the futility of twisting life to our own purposes, of seeking to find meaning where you have not intended it to be found, of trying to put things in the place where only you should be.

Help us to see the futility of these false starts and to find our satisfaction in you, to rejoice in the gifts that you give to us. Lord God, give us this wisdom and insight, we pray.

Amen.