

"Questing for Purpose" Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 September 2025

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[0 : 00] Before we go on, let's ask the Lord's blessing as we open his word. Father, we need desperately to be humble, honest people.

! Not because humility is a good virtue, and if we're honest, we like to be around humble that we won't hide behind accomplishments, good behavior, politeness, but Lord, we will see us for how we truly are, people that are in desperate need of a savior, people that look to all sorts of different things to be a savior to us, and yet all these things come short.

Lord, help us to have eyes to see and ears to hear and minds to comprehend what you would speak to us this morning from your word about. We pray this in Christ's name. In 1940, Viktor Frankl and most of his family were rounded up and sent to a Nazi concentration camp.

He endured years in multiple camps. He actually survived, but he lost his entire family, including his wife, whom he had recently married. After he was liberated, he wrote a book titled Man's Search for Meaning.

In it, he recounts that, among other things, that prisoners who found purpose were able to endure the horrors of the camps, whether or not they were murdered or they survived.

[1 : 38] He would say in his book, quote, Those who have a why to live can bear with almost any how. I think it's a remarkable book, and although it is not gospel truth, there's a lot of wisdom in Frankl's writing.

Having a purpose is so very essential to what it means to be human. We need to understand and feel that what we do matters. Nobody wants to work for it to count for nothing.

We want to know we're not just a cog in a machine, but we have a place. But how do we find such meaning?

That's the real challenge. We know that we need a purpose, but where do we find it? We search for our meaning in things that do not last or cannot last, and we become lost when the thing that defines us no longer works.

And what follows is a crisis of purpose. We're in our second week in Ecclesiastes. I've chosen, even though the English Standard Version of which we're reading calls the teacher or the main character, the preacher.

[3 : 02] I like to call him the sage. And here the sage begins his real investigation. If he kind of laid out what the problem is in verses 1 to 11 of chapter 1, what follows could be called him getting into the quest.

The search for purpose. The quest for meaning. To find out what exactly humanity's true purpose and meaning in life look like. So, this is a longer text.

We're going to touch on just about every aspect of it. We'll look at chapter 1 of 12 to 18. That's what Brad read for us, but we're going to actually go through the rest of chapter 2.

We're going to look at the quest itself. The sage will lay out the parameters for his quest. And he will look at three aspects of where we, as 21st century Canadians, and also Israelites from 3,000 years ago, where we will find or look for meaning.

Specifically, we'll look for meaning in pleasure and in culture. And we'll look for meaning in wise living. We kind of call that clean living now.

[4 : 15] And then finally, work and vocation. So, the sage, he begins his quest, verses 12 to 18 of chapter 1.

And he introduces himself as a Solomonic figure. So, King Solomon, the third king of Israel, the successor to King David, King David's son.

He was a grand figure, kind of Israel's high point in the kingdom. Whether or not Solomon wrote this, I think is besides the point. I think we can glean some stuff if we, you know, read it as if

Solomon himself wrote it.

I think we can glean other things if we see it in a different way. I will just say that this sage, whether or not he is Solomon, he is introducing himself as a Solomonic figure. A kind of king that has unbelievable wealth and renown, who has philosophized and investigated the meaning of life and death.

And he has done it in such a way where all of his money and his resources and his faculties have been employed. Every rock, so to speak, has been overturned in the quest to find meaning.

[5 : 30] Therefore, the Solomonic figure, he's to be trusted. He has done such a thorough job, far better than anything we could do. And he is saying, listen, right off the bat, I have undertaken this quest.

It is far more thorough than anything that anybody else has tried. Like, just trust me on this. And yet, this most capable and well-equipped sage states from the very beginning that such an inquiry, it did not lead to an answer.

In fact, it only caused him more difficulty and frustrations. It caused him to have more questions. Despite his great efforts, such an inquiry was ultimately fruitless.

For the sage, he could not find the answers to the questions he sought. This is what he says in verse 14, and I'll read to 18. I've seen everything that is done under the sun.

And behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. And just a bit of a reminder from last week, if you forget or if you weren't here, vanity is this term that we'll see throughout Ecclesiastes, and it describes vapor, mist.

[6 : 49] I described it last week as a cold, frigid February morning, and you breathe, and you just see mist. You see it. You can't grasp it. You can't keep it.

You can't bottle it. It is gone. Go back to verse 14. I'll read it again. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, all is vapor, all is mist, and a striving after the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experiences of wisdom and knowledge.

And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceive that this is also but a striving after the wind. Verse 18. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

It's not as if the sage here is saying that there is nothing good under the sun, that life is devoid of any goodness. Rather, he is describing our collective inability to exhaust all there is to know.

[8 : 01] So the most capable, the smartest, the wealthiest of all philosophers, of all investigators, he is realizing that there are limits he's bumping up against.

He can only know so much. That's really what verse 15 is getting at. What is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted. There are limits to our ability to understand. In fact, the more the sage investigated, the more he understood that the world is not as it should be, and we are not as we ought to be, and yet there must be an answer to this crisis, this search for purpose and meaning, because no human being is satisfied with just existing.

It's not enough to just breathe and eat and sleep and wake up and do it all again the next day. So the sage, right from the beginning, it's if he's sitting in an armchair as an elderly man, giving this story of, you know, back in the day I did a wildly thorough investigation of life.

It came up short. Now let me tell you about it. Let me walk you through it. It's like almost a bit of a retrospect here. You'll get into the first investigation of pleasure and culture.

[9 : 27] Starting in chapter 2, verse 1. I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself.

But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad, and of pleasure, What use is it? 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.

I made great works. I built homes. Sorry, I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

I made myself pools from which to water the forests of growing trees. 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.

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 son of man.

[10:39] I'll pause there. The sage now seeks pleasure in this quest to find ultimate meaning. He aims to engage all the physical senses to discover if any ultimate meaning exists in there.

He visits the finest restaurants. He drinks the best vintage. He parties with the A-list. He enjoys the top entertainment of his day. He undertakes large building projects as if he were some kind of ancient Emirati.

He designs grand gardens that rival Eden itself. I think I'll touch on this a bit later on. The language here of building a park, in the original language, it has Edenic kind of overtones to it.

Again, fruit trees, pools, forests. This man is undertaking an incredible legacy building project to enjoy culture and goodness and pleasure.

He then explores sensuality with whoever he desires, even if it means against their will. Clearly slavery and concubines here.

[11:52] He has servants for every need, vacation homes, he has cottages, and more money than he can spend. I mean, it really is a no-holds-bars deep dive.

And somehow, he says at the beginning of all of this, that somehow he kept his faculties. He wasn't given completely into hedonism. Hard to understand how, but nevertheless, this is what he says.

And the question is, has it brought him any long-lasting, deep, eternal meaning? He continues on in verse 9 and 10.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. That's kind of like he didn't let himself go into all sorts of an uncontrollable, hedonistic experience.

Verse 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.

[13:01] There are no kings or queens among us, but modern Western life is about as close to a royal existence that anybody has had in the history of mankind.

It's really incredible what we have at our fingertips. We're no longer subsistence farmers. We have options, and plenty of them.

So many options that we get exhausted from our options. And many of you, if you're honest, myself included, I see some of myself, you might see some of yourself in these verses, recognizing a similar experience to the sage.

Like the sage, you haven't really held anything back that your eyes have desired. Any things that your heart has wanted, you have indulged in.

You have enjoyed both lawful and wonderful pleasures, but also maybe unlawful and illicit pleasures. But have you felt a sense of purpose and meaning in them that still resonates today, that continues on, that doesn't diminish in any way?

[14:12] You still feel that sense of purpose and meaning, that great enjoyment, or has it waned? Even worse, do you feel guilt around it, some of those illicit things?

I know I do. Maybe you do as well. The sage continues, verse 11.

Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

You know, we engage in this consumption that really doesn't have many limits.

I'm speaking generally here. Thinking that it will gladden our hearts, and yet we all know that getting everything you want does not lead to pleasure, but it is a kind of, I don't want to say hell on earth because it seems too dramatic, but it leads to maybe more heartache than it does to a heart that's gladdened.

[15:29] When children are given everything they want and no is not a word that they've heard, usually these children don't grow up to be fine, wonderful, thoughtful, caring, selfless, well-rounded adults, what do we say?

They become spoiled. This is what it looks like to pursue pleasure as an end, completely devoid, completely without God.

In fact, the sage, like I mentioned before, he tries to imitate the reality of Eden, of a paradise, but Eden had God residing in it.

The Eden he's creating is completely without God. And in fact, you'll notice how God is completely absent from this complete pursuit of pleasure.

What does he say? I made, I built, I gathered, I had, I grew, I got, whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them, I kept my heart from no pleasure.

[16:39] It's me, it's I. He is trying to build himself up, to bring himself glory, to engage in all the things that will elevate him to the very highest of thrones.

His self-esteem is like at an 11. But bolstering one's self-esteem is not a recipe for meaning and purpose. Really interesting.

Some of you may know Arthur Brooks. He is a happiness expert, if you can even call somebody that. He's a Harvard professor, and he's wrote a ton of books.

I listened to a podcast this week where he was talking about this pursuit of the me, this embrace of the I.

And this is what he said. Quote, left to my devices, I'm going to think all day long about my stuff, all the things that I'm actually doing. And that's really boring, and it's tedious, and it's terrifying, and it's terrible.

[17:43] It's hard to break out of that, as a matter of fact. It's one of the characteristics of clinical depression, ruminating, thinking about yourself. And it's almost like a prison.

It's like you're locked up with, it's like you're locked up with you all the time. That's one of the characteristics of clinical depression. You get peace and perspective instead from zooming out into the universe and finding your smallness.

It's paradoxical, isn't it? It feels like you should be less happy when you're small, because your self-esteem would be lower. Side note, the self-esteem in literature that everybody thought they knew, which is that if your self-esteem is higher, you'll be happier.

It doesn't stand up. And a lot of really good scientists have questioned that. Why? Because of this autofocus. It's maddening to be thinking about yourself all the time.

Me, me, me. I'm so great. I'm so important. I'm so interesting. And then he says, no, you're not. And thank God. That's important for us to remember.

[18:46] An intense focus on me is no recipe for salvation. It is a recipe for disaster.

And if such, and it kind of begs the question, if such unchecked pleasure will not bring meaning and purpose, surely the opposite, right? A morally upright and intellectually vigorous life will give us pleasure.

So if an engagement of hedonism and enjoyment without limits, if that will not give us pleasure, let's pendulum swing to the other side.

Let's look at the next section starting in verse 12 to 17. The sage returns to the quest. So I turn to consider wisdom and madness and folly.

For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly.

[19:47] So, sorry, I'll start verse 13 again. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head but the fool walks in darkness.

And yet I perceive that the same event happens to all of them. 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 is also vanity. For 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. So I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. For all is vanity and a striving after the wind.

I've committed to living a good life, you might say. I'll pursue morally upright activities. I will avoid associating with degenerates.

[20:53] I will donate to the right charities. I will support the right candidates. I will contribute to my church. I will compost. I'll offset my carbon footprint.

I will do whatever is necessary to live according to the vision of a good, morally upright life from whatever perspective I support and I choose to embrace.

Surely this will give me a sense of meaning and purpose beyond this life. And the answer, the sage says, is no. You will perish in the same way as the fool.

So what's the point? The sage, he is rattled. He is vexed. He is upset. And he says that he has hated life not because he has developed a suicidal, a set of suicidal thoughts but because his quest kept falling short.

This is what a frustrated person looks like. This is what hopelessness looks like when it begins to set in and begins to take hold. Have you ever felt this way?

[21 : 58] Right? I mean, the sage is laying out his experiences so we can think about ours. Have you ever felt this way? There's much to be gained in a morally upright life.

Hear me out what I'm saying. Listen, I'm not saying be done with morally upright behavior. It's a good thing. But does such behavior achieve for you salvation?

And the answer is no. It is a vain pursuit for death will come to everyone. And this is something that seems morbid and maybe not very kind of the power of positive thinking.

But it's important that we will remember that we will die. Philosophers of old and Christians of old as well talk about a memento mori to remember your death.

death. If you look at any art around the time of the Black Plague you will see humans with skeletons and reapers kind of hanging out eating dinner with them.

[23 : 10] It seems very morbid but it was a way for our Christian forebearers to remember their death. To be accustomed to it.

Death will come for us all. The truly wise person understands that their days are numbered. True wisdom provides a perspective and guides us but it knows that such knowledge cannot save us when death comes for us.

And by the way that doesn't mean we should be okay with death. It is an incredibly unnatural and frightening thing. Death should never be sanitized.

It is ugly. It is painful. It is full of sorrow. Death was never meant for us. Next week we'll look at chapter 3 and we'll touch on verse 11 which I think is I mean it's such an insightful verse but it talks about how God has written eternity into the hearts of men which is to say that we were meant to not touch death.

Well one of the things it'll mean is that we were not to touch death and yet here we are accustomed to it. there's a universal revulsion towards death and that only proves that Ecclesiastes 3 verse 11 that eternity is written on our hearts it only proves that it's true.

[24 : 33] We live in a very bizarre time where there's like two very contradictory kind of schools of thought. One that embraces death in a culture of death and another that rejects death with an incredible amount of intensity.

So on one hand you have a medically assisted regime medically assisted suicide regime in our country that continuously broadens the criteria for accessing euthanasia.

The Post just this past week on the 11th ran a story to highlight this and gave two examples. One of a man who became a widower and his grief was so much that somehow he qualified for euthanasia because of his grief he was sad.

Another woman was obese and refused any medical intervention until she was granted her suicide. Friends that's a culture of death.

Okay. On the flip side we have this health and wellness fitness culture that continues to grow and by the way if you're going to choose one obviously eat healthy eat your greens everybody alright lift a weight go for a walk whatever it's a good thing they're not like equally terrible things.

[26 : 03] Nevertheless it's a rejection of death with such an intensity that I've mentioned him before but this man Brian Johnson who is a millionaire futurist he is convinced he is convinced in his lifetime that he will solve the problem of death with science.

A very bizarre time we live in. But the reality is and what this text tells us is that we are not in control of death. We cannot choose the day we die in a way that is not suicidal.

And this can be very difficult for us because if you are very health conscious God forbid and I really mean this God forbid I mean get your blood work it comes back super clean you're just you're firing on all cylinders and then you get in a car accident okay and either you're handicapped for your life or you're dead.

and then there's other people who are they're they're smoking a ton they're living like a very unhealthy lifestyle and somehow they crack 80 like where's the fairness in that right?

We do not control our health or sorry our death we do not and we can see how the sage if he is saying listen I've tried hedonism I've tried pleasure now I'm trying clean living mindfulness wisdom right living everything that I need to do and still it's not working my goodness I am rattled I am frustrated you can feel the angst maybe you feel the angst so surely we're going to move on to the next thing if I can't get ultimate meaning from pleasure if I can't get ultimate meaning from wise

living then maybe through my work and through my vocation I can find something I can create a legacy that will last that I can pass on and it will continue on until time ends read with me verses 18 to 23 I hated 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 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 so I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun 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 what is a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun 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 strike three you're out he is not finding much success in his quest for meaning one thing I love about this section is that the sage is he's highlighting the absurdity of a total work culture a work culture that doesn't help our lives flourish as much as our lives existing to serve our work there's never enough money to earn never enough promotions to chase never enough time to spend on a project constantly thinking about work so that even in our sleep we are busy we have busy minds what should provide us with life robs our hearts of peace and again

[29 : 57] I just want to just say really quickly work is a beautiful wonderful thing it's valuable the Bible's actually full of other bits of wisdom that say do not be slothful I think later on in Ecclesiastes it's like be like the ant work hard be studious be honest hard working integral work hard but again if we're thinking about the sage who's on a quest to find meaning ultimate purpose it is not found in his work he is looking for work to become his sense of identity but it will demand more and more from him and from us and the things and people we really cherish will suffer there's a lovely couple downtown at the downtown Messiah and he was retired now but he was a major in the military but he had a lot of promise his father was a general and he made the decision when his kids were in high school to basically step away from the military to go into the private service and then his kids went to university and graduated and then he went back to the military and then he just stayed at his rank of major and he did not continue on and he talked a bit about this about how

I don't know if it's the case anymore but back then if you wanted to become a general the saying was it'll cost you a marriage if you want to be a general it'll cost you a marriage I'm sure that's not the case all the way through every general is divorced but that phrase always stuck with me because that is this total work culture where everything everything is sacrificed because of the meaning that is associated upon me that has to do with our work that I'm finding my identity in our work and the sage is saying and we all know yet we fall into this all too easily that we cannot make work a totalizing endeavor so we've looked at pleasure and we've looked at wisdom and we looked at work and we found them all wanting now what is there another category there's no more categories at least in this section but now what where's the hope

I hope that you felt the weight of this quest I mean it's been just a 20 25 30 minutes whatever I hope you have felt disillusioned to some degree or another but in a good way if our reality of pleasure and wise living and work is built upon a false promise of ultimate meaning then to be disillusioned with it is to make steps towards reality and to make steps towards freedom and joy and real purpose and real meaning what could be better than knowing that all the pleasure moral living and total work culture we find ourselves in is utter vanity if it does not give us what we think it will give us how blessed are we to come to this realization hopefully before it's too late this is a blessing okay being disillusioned right now is a gift from God we cannot hold on to pleasure we can't rest on our laurels we can't keep even a single coin forever it is a blessing to know this ultimately pleasure and wisdom and good work that we do are all gifts from God but the pleasure sorry but the problem arises when these things are emphasized without any mention of

God without any consultation with God looking to him asking him for strength or salvation God in this section is mentioned in verse 13 and then is completely absent until this last portion verses 24 to 26 he is nowhere to be found okay God is absent from the sages quest this whole endeavor is unbelievably self-centered and if we're engaged in it it's unbelievably self-centered for us as well see the sage shows us that although we are people who live under the sun okay in this mortal life we also have eternity written on our hearts and that means eternal meaning and purpose it's what we deeply crave and it cannot be found under the sun only then when we come to this realization can we truly turn to

Lord as people that are desperate for only what he can give and what we desperately need imagine a life that is growing towards I don't want to say is completely free of because we'll still falter but is growing towards freedom from vain attempts at controlling every aspect of our life trying to curate every move every promotion every strategic financial decision from the way we're raising our kids who they're playing with the cars we drive the neighborhoods we live in that can feel like a weight that is growing and growing and growing upon our shoulders imagine having an identity that does not need to be reinvented every few years imagine the freedom of that again we're growing into this but imagine if that's the trajectory of your life imagine having meaning that is rooted in the eternal [36 : 10] God who scripture constantly says is unchanging unchanging this is what the sage is beginning to realize in this last section I'll read it read it with me starting in verse 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 there it is it becomes a gift and not an ultimate end in itself for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment 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 it to one who pleases God this also is vanity and a striving after the wind when we see life as a gift from God we begin to become incredibly generous people again not overnight but we become incredibly generous people our suffering is no longer an existential threat to our very identity so that we can endure knowing our frailty and yet through it all have joy and when death comes even though we will have fear and it is still scary and it is scary the fear will not crush us and the answer is because of what

Christ has done on the cross why because in his death and resurrection Christ defeats death and he makes a mockery out of it he suffers but then endures and is victorious in his ascension he goes to prepare a place for us so that we will enjoy pleasures forevermore because his work is completed upon the cross we need not work for a salvation that we could never win instead we receive it by faith it's a gift to us so we can enjoy Christ's labors and therefore our work is freed up so that it is not attached to our identity and rather it becomes redeemed and we can get promotion and we can celebrate that and we cannot get a promotion and it won't crush us we can learn to work and give for the benefit of others around us and ultimately for the glory of the Lord so even though in this life we are but dust that we ought to remember our death in Christ we have a completely fulfilled existence forevermore in eternity in the presence of the one true God but that that is for us in this life and that we learn to grow into that life by faith because of the grace that God gives to us in Christ Jesus let's pray Lord God disillusion us help us to see the unreality of our lives if it is rooted in the pursuit of pleasure or clean wise living or work that is an end to itself that is the means by which we think we will have eternal purpose and meaning Lord shake us up help us to be very real people that desire reality even if it is a bit unsettling Lord ultimately we want this reality to lead us to truth to your son who has gone the distance for us so that we may know pleasure forever more eternal life and that we do not have to ultimately fear death Lord as we continue on in this series help us to be very sober minded people point us towards your son we pray this in Christ's name Amen God