

Finding Joy

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes is a complicated book and you can see just how complicated it is by the second verse in chapter one that we looked at last week, a bit of a discouraging start.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And you'll notice we haven't chosen that as our memory verse. Solomon's not depressed, he's not cynical, he's not an atheist. He's being ruthlessly honest, asking the question, is there really anything worth doing? And he cuts straight across our polite, need I say, Canadian, sentimental way of talking and he says, what do you really live for? I mean, we're all living for something. What is it you're living for? Because there's something about our world and our life and our experience that we just, we can't iron out, we can't flatten it out. There's something bent and twisted and we can't straighten it. And our lives are vanity. Remember last week, they're like a puff of smoke that you can't grab a hold of. They're here, beautiful, gone tomorrow, the barest puff of wind, like a bubble, the closest thing to zero. This was the Hebrew word, hevel, vanity. And today we come to Ecclesiastes 2 and it is like an expose of the lifestyles of the rich and fabulous. But there's a very big twist and that twist is the gift of complete honesty.

Here is a man who has it all and in chapter 2 he does it all. He pushes the boundaries of experience to see how much he can get out of life. And even though he indulges every desire and builds beautiful things, he just can't seem to fix that sense inside himself that something is lacking. And it brings him to the point of despair. And you can see this sequence from chapter 1 in the very third verse of chapter 1. So right after he's mentioned vanity, he says in chapter 1 verse 3, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? And then in chapter 2 he turns himself over to this search for gain, which is way more than just having good times and fun, fun, fun and amusement.

He's searching for reward, more than just momentary happiness. Because he's searching for gain, it means that something is lacking. He's saying we have a deficit in our hearts. We have a sense of how useless ordinary pleasure is to feeding or to fixing our lives. The question arises directly out of Hevel, everything being vanity. What can I do to make my life substantially better? Why is it that I always need more? Why do I come away from so many things in life feeling empty? And why is it that even the best things in my life only give me a passing sense of happiness? We grab for things, we work hard to grab things, but they just don't deliver. So we keep going. We keep trying the same thing. Next year I need a better holiday. I need a better spouse. I need a better job or a better house or better kids. But nothing seems to fix that thing in me. And I think that's one of the reasons that the North American dream is so cruel. You know the dream, believe in yourself and you can do anything that you dream of?

[3 : 56] Well it puts the blame on you for the deficit and not finding it. And I think it explains FOMO, the fear of missing out. There is a social media industry dedicated to making you feel as though you're the one missing out on what everyone else has to make them happy. You know the best meal, more fun, the latest posting. And I think chapter two is a bit of a dangerous chapter for us because Solomon pursues happiness. He pursues this deficit at all costs.

And he is the king of Israel and he completely cuts loose to find out what makes him happy. It's like he's squeezing the last juice out of life until it squeaks.

Chapter two is like an extended rum springer. In the Amish communities they have a thing called rum springer. The children who grow up in Amish communities grow up in an incredibly protected and strict environment. When they get to the age of 16 some communities send them out for a week or two to try every vice that they were never allowed to try when they were younger. And the hope is that over time they'll say these vices don't work and we'll go and make ourselves adult Amish.

Well chapter two is like an extended rum springer for Solomon. And it's very important for us because basically he tells us it doesn't work. All the best experiences and pleasures and achievements and brilliance in the world do not bring him the gain that he has asked for. So I'm going to look at the passage under two headings. The first heading is this the great quest the great quest and you can hear this quest in verse one. I said in my heart come now I will test you with pleasure enjoy yourself literally be good to yourself. Verse 10 whatever my eyes desired I didn't keep from them I kept my heart from no pleasure. Now this is a very west coast approach it's a west coast quest. He's hunting the good life with a relentless intensity. How do I create my best life how do I curate my life so that

I can have the good life now. And if he had googled and went online and looked up how to find the good life there are lists of rules out there and the first rule on the list is engage life with a vengeance which just shows that not much has changed since Solomon. He's not going to follow anyone else's path.

[6 : 44] He's going to taste and touch and feel and immerse himself in the quest in the hope that he will find this thing and it'll fix his soul. And so for the first three quarters of the chapter he has three strategies that he tries and the first strategy is pleasure verses one to three and ten to eleven.

Here is a man who's got the whole world at his feet and his first strategy is dedicated hedonism. I mean surely pleasure physical pleasure is going to get close to the purpose of life yeah this is no casual half-hearted look on from a distance this is a deep dive and so on the first corner in verse two he tries comedy and laughter he goes to every live comedy club he finds the best jokes that he can he pranks his friends he pokes fun at people he doesn't like ha ha ha ha and he quickly comes to realize that all the laughter in the world does not feed his soul and does not fix his life it doesn't give him give him any meaning so in verse three he turns to wine not rolling drunk he still keeps some distance and some wisdom about himself but to cheer himself to wake or to take away the sorrow and find happiness but like pleasure and laughter nothing wrong with them in themselves they were fun perhaps but they're no use they don't accomplish they don't gain anything they're useless in moving us forward or resolving the vanity of life if I if anything they only anesthetize us to the problem so that's the first strategy pleasure the second strategy is in verses four nine it's achievement let's look at verse four I made great works I built houses and planted vineyards for myself I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees so this is about this is more long-term delayed gratification projects building things leaving a mark on the world becoming a somebody building something that lasts reaching a level of success and achievement surely this is where the good life is this is another very Vancouver pursuit isn't it he was incredibly successful he builds houses plural vineyards plural gardens plural and these are not little lawn projects these have massive sculpted waterways the architectural envy of the world everything he built he designed beautiful award-winning magnificent to look at it exactly as he had visualized them and he had a tremendous workforce and through that he gathered art treasures and became a collector he had one of the best of everything he would be like a billionaire in terms of his net worth but his tastes were cultured so he bought the best music bands to his garden parties and all the beautiful people were there he sponsored the arts he had over a thousand wives and concubines explored every possible sexual pleasure and if you look more closely there is a desperate me centeredness to this quest and I went through and I counted I me my myself 56 times in the first 20 verses of this chapter in other words his desperate quest has warped his own moral compass the quest for something deeper and for meaning and for award for Solomon has become driven by selfishness and you can see this in the repetition of the phrase for myself just look at these verses I'm going to read them again verse 4 I made great works I built houses and planted vineyards for myself verse 5 I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees verse 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees verse 7 I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house I had great possessions of herds and flocks more than any other who'd been before me in Jerusalem verse 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces I got singers both men and women and many concubines the delight of the sons of men verse 9 so I became Mr. Big I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem in other words anything that looked like it would fix the deficit in his heart he just reached out and took it didn't matter to him how it affected anyone else he threw off all moral judgment and the one question he asked is what's going to make me truly happy and I think you have to admire his honesty here I mean many of the

things that he immersed himself are good gifts from God gardens music laughter but when we come to slaves and concubines we know there's something wrong here in buying slaves is sin God specifically warns the kings of Israel about this and Solomon's massive success had a very dark side to it the only reason he could afford all this was that he massively overtaxed the people of God and made them his slaves and when he died the people of Israel rose up and tore the kingdom in half and God is also very clear about marriage and concubines and when you read the narrative of Solomon we find that he marries so many foreign wives and brings he brings for them to please them the foreign deities and he sets up altars and he sets up idols in Jerusalem and his heart is led away from God and he begins to worship the other gods does the search work no it doesn't verse 9 I became great and I surpassed all those who were before me in Jerusalem although my wisdom remained with me verse 10 whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them I kept my heart from no pleasure but I found pleasure in all my toil and this was my reward for all my toil verse 11 I considered all that my hands had done 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 it's very interesting that the word for park when he builds parks is the Hebrew word for paradise in other words all his achievements and building are aimed at getting back into the garden of Eden to climb out of the frustrations of this fleeting life to use pleasure and success to make life right and he lays on pleasure and success the great burden of fixing his life and taking him back to the garden of Eden and he finds it makes him emptier than when he began and so we come briefly to the third strategy and the third strategy is one of self-improvement and the life of the mind verses 12 to 14 so he cultivates wisdom and insight and in some measure he achieves it but he only becomes wise enough to see that it's not working that it's not really making life better

Jim Packer says about Ecclesiastes that it's a journey into the dark before it's a journey into the light and I think he's right so we read in verse 17 so I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me it's still all vanity and a striving after wind what spoils everything is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give there seems to be this lie at the heart of our existence where we keep expecting so much and we keep being disappointed we have this inbuilt longing for transcendence and permanence but the best and the highest experiences in this life just don't give it to us and in this third strategy the thing that Solomon finds so galling is death you end up working he says for someone else

[15 : 54] I've got to leave it all behind everything I've built and everything I've created all my success and my treasure it's going to go to someone else it's going to fitter it away and we know Solomon's son was a fool and my father lived a very big life and when he died I have the privilege of clearing through his things and his files filing cabinet after filing cabinet all sorts of life changing decisions recorded in those files but I had to shred the most of them and for years he put cash in his bible commentaries on his shelves I'm glad he told us before he died so that we had to sort through every book in their shelves and it was well worth it but you see this is part of wisdom I am going to die you are going to die don't be surprised by this and we'll be remembered for a few days and then we'll be completely forgotten and that means there's no lasting value in the quest if you're focused on things here and now the great search comes to nothing and so I need to move quickly to the second part which is verses 24 to 26 and I've called this the better question there's a radical turn at verse 24 it's in his despair

Solomon stops the desperate search to create the good life for himself and it's only when he stops this desperate quest and opens his hand that he's able to receive the good life as a gift for God it's when he stops moving around so relentlessly and restlessly for long enough to do this that he realizes this comes from God it's only as Solomon is brought so very low that he has the humility to look up and ask a completely different question he's been looking for what is good the good life since verse 1 and now he sees that the good life is on offer from God and he must receive it so look at verses 24 to 26 with me there is nothing better that's the word good better there is nothing gooder for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil why? this also I saw is from the hand of God for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment now for the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy the things that he's after but to the sinner he's given the business of gathering and collecting only to give to the one who pleases God and that also is vanity and striving after wind so here is the better question from verse 1 to 23 the question that's driving him the question that he's been living by is this what pleases me and in verse 26 there is a whole new question what pleases God and it's only as we

seek to please God that these supernatural gifts of wisdom and joy and knowledge enter our lives as gifts from him they come as the overflow of pleasing God

Brian Elphick is a preacher in England and he said this if you seek joy and knowledge and wisdom you do not get them if you seek if you seek after God you get them for free the gain what is lacking can only be fixed by God and he'll only do it for the one who seeks to please him Elphick says again instead of enjoying wine Solomon was using wine to try and fix his life but pleasing God turns wine back into wine again I think that's very clever and it's like the Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy everything created by God is good nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving for it's made holy by the word of God and prayer so that sense of significance and permanence and transcendence it just doesn't come from anything inside our world it only comes from God but not God at a distance not obeying cold commands but from the relationship of pleasing him in love to find joy we have to learn to please him and to see our lives as serving God and not serving ourselves there's such freedom in this you know if you're a young person today every decision you make feels so weighty you know you have to be perfect you have to be cool

Ecclesiastes 2 tells us you don't have to get it right you don't have to create and curate yourself in a perfect life in fact you'll likely make a mess of it if you try we need to change the question from what pleases me to what pleases God let God take the burden of giving you joy because his yoke is easy and his burden is so light it's a non-burden and for us today what does it mean you know we live this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus what do these what does Jesus' death and resurrection mean for our quest for joy two things one Jesus' death well Jesus' death shows us a king who didn't live to please himself but who gave himself for us in love and if we live to please him he will give us the ability to enjoy the ordinary things in life as well as the strength to turn away from seeking and serving myself and to serve him and please him and secondly

[22 : 05] Jesus' resurrection well it means for all who've come to Jesus death is not the end that what really matters in this life is what I've committed to him it gives our lives here in this world eternal significance and eternal depth and Jesus' resurrection also means there is a new kind of work in this world not toil that has vanity in it not building a great life or building pleasure but it's the work of Christ serving God by serving others others this is the work that does not have vanity in it because it's his work it's not really ours and in the New Testament at the end of the greatest chapter on the resurrection the Apostle Paul says this to the Christians in Corinth he says my beloved brothers and sisters be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord pleasing the Lord knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain it's not heathal

Amen pas la justice no threw desperate in innocent no no so I meant if