

# The Sorrows of Self-Service: Is Anything Worth Doing?

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[ 0 : 00 ] David Short blew my cover a couple of weeks ago when he announced in the bulletin that in the month of August we were going to explore together the book of Ecclesiastes and that I had planned this sermon series called Real Life with a Real God and would be preaching on some of the occasions.

Well it's all true and here I am and glad to have this opportunity of sharing with you what for me, just for me, is a favorite book of the Bible.

Why so? Well, because what Ecclesiastes is after from beginning to end is realism about reality. Life is not to be treated as so much in the way of games. Life is not to be lived in terms of personal pretense.

Life is to be lived in terms of reality. God defines reality. And the call to all of us is to be realists in terms of the way that God makes and manages things.

[ 1 : 40 ] Well now, chapter one of Ecclesiastes, which I guess you studied last week, is establishing the, how shall I say, the frame of reference and the temperature of the book.

What we're being told in chapter one by this teacher, realist that he is, Solomon, as he identifies himself, what we're being told is that life in this world creates a state of mind, which is summarized actually in a phrase in chapter one, verse eight.

I'm taking the phrase as meaning rather more than it means in its context. I'm taking the phrase that is as the overall experience of life as God orders it for us.

And that phrase is the phrase, not satisfied. You look at verse eight and you'll see it. And it's part of a general, how does one say it, a general description of life in this world in terms of phrases like, under the sun, which means judging by appearances.

When you know perhaps that there is more to reality than appearances, God is there and God's plans are realities, but you don't see God who is there and you aren't able to tune in to the realities of life as God has planned it for us.

[ 3 : 58 ] In other words, life is enigmatic and life is constantly unsatisfying. Everything seems to be going nowhere.

And there's another word, which is a key word in Ecclesiastes that expresses that. That's the word translated vanity in our older Bibles.

The word is hevel in the Hebrew. It's been very well described as a word that points to bubbles and smoke.

What does that mean? Well, if you blow bubbles, as I suppose we all did as children, and then try to catch them, what happens is that they burst before you ever can get hold of them.

And if you generate smoke, there are all sorts of ways of raising smoke, but then you stretch out your hands and try to catch it, well, you can't.

[ 5 : 09 ] The smoke simply dissipates and dissolves away in front of your eyes. Well, says Ecclesiastes chapter 1, that's how life feels.

And it's on the basis of that diagnosis of how life feels that Solomon goes on to write chapter 2. Now, I coined a phrase to act as a heading for chapter 2, the sorrows of self-service.

That phrase, self-service, of course, I picked up from going in and out of filling stations. That's where you meet the phrase, too.

But it's self-service here in a different level of meaning. It's self-service in the sense of doing everything in the expectation and hope that it will make you happy, that it will satisfy you, that it will turn life from every standpoint into a joy and a delight, and it will banish from life everything that is,

shall I say, gloomy and prickly and unhappy.

[ 6 : 44 ] Well, that isn't so, of course. And chapter 2 represents Solomon narrating his experience of discovering that it isn't so.

And the chapter falls neatly into three sections. The first is the far away, the longest, and the most substantial. In verses 1 through 17 of chapter 2, Solomon reviews three forms of self-service, which he says, I went into myself.

I tried them. And I found that none of them brought the satisfaction and joy and sense of contentment and arrival, and this resolves all the problems of life, that sort of attitude.

None of them brought me anything like that sense of the situation. All of them left me with frustration of one sort or another.

What are they? Well, I've labeled them self-indulgence. That's the quest for pleasure. And that's being dealt with in the first three verses of the chapter.

[ 8 : 23 ] And then Solomon comes back to it in verses 10 and 11. Let me just read from the opening words of verse 10.

Whatever my eye desired, I didn't 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.

In other words, the most that I got out of the quest for pleasure was fleeting moments of what felt like fun in doing things successfully.

Just that. I'd hoped, Solomon implies, for a great deal more. Well, that's where self-indulgence got him.

Not very far along the path that he was seeking to travel. And then there's what I call self-aggrandizement, aggrandizement, being big, feeling important, having a sense of achievement, patting oneself on the back, if one may express it that way.

[ 9 : 46 ] The quest for performance on projects, which is what's under consideration here, that's dealt with in verses four through nine of Ecclesiastes chapter two.

And it's a frame of mind which we, all of us, I think, understand because it resonates with something in everybody's makeup.

I want to do big things. I want to be important. Well, yes, try it and see what happens.

Solomon tells you, in fact, what happens. It's a quest for the sense of achievement that he's following. It involves him in something of which he speaks a number of times, toil, hard work.

You put your back into whatever the project is that you think is going to make you big. and Solomon speaks in detail of the great works.

[ 10 : 59 ] I built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens, made pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves.

I had great possessions of herds and flocks. And so it goes on. Solomon has done all the things that are thought of, at least were thought of in his day, as making a person really big.

and his comment at the end of the project is this. Then I considered, this is verse 11, I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I'd expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity, hevel, and a striving after wind.

Oh yes, that's another phrase that he uses for the attempt to do what actually can't be done. Grab hold of the wind, how do you do it?

Well, of course, you can't do it. In other words, it's a waste of effort. It's toil that has got you nowhere. All was vanity, and a striving after wind, he says, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

[ 12 : 24 ] Are you beginning to get the wavelength? on which he's speaking to us now? He's a disillusioned performer. I thought these things were going to make me big, and now that I've done them and got them all together, do I feel big?

No, not in the least. I feel frustrated, and that's all. But that's not quite the end of the matter.

he did also commit himself to self-improvement, by which I mean, and he meant, the cultivation of wisdom, the quest for wisdom's perceptiveness, the possession of insight, great insight, into the realities of life in this world.

He labored, in other words, to be a really wise man. And he's saying two things about this. He believes that in measure he has achieved some wisdom, but it's wisdom to see that the fullness of wisdom hasn't come his way at all.

The self-improvement that he aimed at, well, there are hints at ways in which he's better able to perform now than he was before he sought wisdom.

[14:04] But he hasn't achieved anything like the perception, the perfection of understanding that he'd hoped for.

wisdom. And he comments on that in verses 14 through 16. Let me just run through them. I turn to consider wisdom and madness and folly.

That is, the alternative to wisdom. I turn to consider wisdom and the condition of not having wisdom. And then I found myself up against this.

what can the man do who comes after the king? And he's the king, you see, so he's feeling the force of that question.

What can the man do who comes after me? Only what's already been done. Then I saw that there's more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there's more gain in light than in darkness, because the wise person has his eyes in his head, while the fool walks in darkness.

[15:14] And yet, now here's the punchline, and yet I perceived 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? What have I gained by my quest for wisdom? putting it in modern terms, what have I gained by reading all those books, and going to all those lectures, and studying the way that I've been studying?

What's it given me? Well, he's already answering his own question. It's given me a capacity to see when I'm not making headway, whereas some people, the fools, they don't see when they're not making headway.

But that's the only difference. Both of us are not making headway, so that the quest for our self-improvement and our advance in true wisdom is really coming to nothing, back to vanity, back to nothing achieved under the sun.

and now when you stand back from these three attempts at self-service to get yourself to a good place, which you aren't in at the moment, but which you want to be in, well, then you realize all these quests are driven by pride, personal pride, self-centeredness, a desire to exalt me, me, me, Mr.

[17:16] Big, and that for sure isn't what life is about. That's what Solomon wants us to see.

people labor in self-indulgence, in self-improvement, attempts at self-improvement anyway, and self-aggrandizement through massive projects, but when they've achieved all that they hope to achieve, they find they haven't got anywhere.

and what they've been doing is following the push of pride and inflating their ego.

Think of your ego as a balloon. You blow into it and it gets bigger. Well, yes, but then eventually it bursts. And just for the moment, he makes the point that real wisdom deflates the balloon of your ego and makes you realize that you haven't got anywhere.

And so in verse 17, he sums it all up. He's a literary chap with some skill and he brings it all together very skillfully in this verse.

[18:48] I hated life. That's his reaction to what he's been doing. I hated life because what he's done under the sun was grievous to me.

For all is vanity and a striving after wind. It's all a matter of getting nowhere.

time to do you see that? I tried it all and found by experience that that's all that it is.

You get nowhere by trying so very hard to get someone. and then he goes on in the next paragraph that's verses 18 through 23 to talk in a general way about the two frustrations that he experienced through this threefold quest of self service.

two frustrations. One is that's the producer of whatever effect it is that he has labored to produce the producer himself sooner or later is under appreciated.

[20:21] That is people don't respect you for what you've done. And with that comes the second frustration the product of your labor all that toil and all that investment of effort that gets mishandled by people who don't appreciate it and whose goals are not your goals anyway but they get hold of it and they devalue it by using it in a way which doesn't have a strategy of wisdom behind it at all.

So what are you doing? You're producing something or other for folk then to devalue by mishandling it.

things so what has happened to your passion to be Mr. Big to whom everybody looks up because of all the wisdom and improvement of life and benefit to humanity and so on and so on that you've

brought.

well like other things he says I realized it's vanity it's striving after wind it's failure to get anywhere it's very frustrating to think that that's life's bottom line but it is he says and so he's very strong here in what he says he asks a question and he answers it in verses 22 and 23 what has 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 sorrow is one thing that he has and his work is a vexation yes he looks at what he's doing and he looks on what he has done to get to the point he's at now where he's doing whatever it is that he's doing and it's all a vexation even in the night his heart doesn't rest he's restless and has sorrow as it says in verse 21 well it's not in any sense a rival at happiness he's worked his what am I to say worked his hands to the bone and got nowhere he's achieved all that he's achieved and it hasn't taken other people anywhere frustration frustration frustration is the name turns out to be the name of the game from beginning to end and he says right at the end of verse 23 this also is vanity emptiness non-achievement futility so if you want the good life take warning this is not the path to it and that's the big point that he's concerned to make in chapter 2 and right at the end of the chapter verses 24 through 26 he puts a corrective paragraph now this is something which you'll see again and again in Ecclesiastes every now and then he inserts a corrective paragraph to put right something that he's been spelling out as being wrong because the book is a whole and he's written thought it out and written it as a whole you mustn't detach one of these corrective paragraphs from the others they build up as the book goes on and at the moment

I'm in chapter 2 and I'm going to stop there but this is the first corrective paragraph and it gives a hint of things to come verse 24 he writes by way of correction of all that we've seen so far there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil he doesn't spend his time then thinking about all the applause and so forth that is going to result from his toil he eats and drinks that is he enjoys his meals and he finds enjoyment in doing whatever it is that he does there's nothing better for a person than to live like that this also he writes

[ 26 : 11 ] I saw this also I saw is from the hand of God for who apart from him can eat or who can have enjoyment in other words if you want enjoyment out of life and enjoyment actually is Ecclesiastes key word or one of his key words for what we all of us do want out of life to be satisfied to feel enriched to have a sense that life has been worthwhile yes says Ecclesiastes this is God's gift and you won't get this sense of the sense of the significance of your life from any other source apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment but verse verse 26 to the one who pleases him

God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy whereas to the sinner he's given the business of gathering and collecting just to give to one who pleases God now he says this also is vanity and a striving after wind if you don't see it I mean if you don't see that this is how things work and if you go on trying out of the investment of energy or toil or whatever it is that you have invested in your life hoping to get your satisfaction and your joy and your contentment out of that I say if you go on along that path you'll never make it and at every turn of the road you will have to say of your life not satisfied

I'm not achieving what I want so he's making his point very clear really in order to find the secret of joy in life we have to learn to please God we have to learn to see our life as service of God not self service but service of the God who made us and put us in this world service then which he directs service which focuses on him and pleasing him as a goal service which expresses the thought my life only means anything as I give it away in the service of God give it away you see as distinct from hanging on to it as my stamping ground where I'm going to decide what I'll do and I'll do it and then everything in the garden will be lovely won't it well of course as we've seen it won't and that's the lesson that Ecclesiastes wants us to learn and that of course brings us right to where we are today Ecclesiastes was writing something like 3,000 years ago we today are here in church to celebrate the Lord's Supper and what's the link why the link is precisely that we who from our hearts celebrate the Lord's Supper because it commemorates what the Lord Jesus has done for our redemption we every time we do that are identifying ourselves as disciples of the Savior and we are giving ourselves a way to serve him and we're taking our hands off all the self-centered self-centeredness which has shaped the planning of the lives of those who haven't yet become disciples of the Savior if we by the grace of God have heard and learned the gospel and given our hearts to the Savior so that our life is for him and that's what we're focused on then we are going to find as a product perhaps I should say a byproduct of the way we're living that we are enjoying doing the

ordinary things of life even eating and drinking at the meal table three times a day and we are enjoying the work we do as servants of Christ seeking to please him and so the name for the quality that marks our lives becomes a name that can be spelt in three little letters

[ 32 : 02 ] J-O-Y Joy now I wonder if we really are together in this I've spoken for long enough and my wife afterwards will tell me too long so I'm stopped but quite seriously this is the fundamental lesson that Ecclesiastes 2 is concerned to teach us about our life and it's a lesson which I regard as enormously important and therefore if I go on and on talking about it you must understand why and excuse me this is absolutely vital for the good life see the false trails the self centered trails and avoid them serve the Lord who has loved and saved you and you will find that joy marks your passage all the way let's have these things vivid in our minds and hearts as we come to the

Lord's table let's ask the Lord Jesus who ministers to us from his risen life as we come to his table ask him to enable us to keep these things clear in our own mind for the rest of our lives and so ask him to lead us into the fullness of the joy that will be ours once we learn from our hearts out of gratitude and love to serve him our savior and our master so be it brothers and sisters amen our waiver to hmm yes rise to ah have we ■■■■ which■ in