

"Under the Sun"

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[0 : 0 0] All right, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 2. That is page 518 in the Pew Bible. Ecclesiastes chapter 2, page 518.

! So last week we saw that the book of Ecclesiastes begins with the observation that everything is fleeting. Vanity of vanity, says the preacher. All is vanity. And that word vanity is being used in the older sense of empty or futile. It's a translation of the Hebrew word Pastor Matt pointed out last week, this Hebrew word hevel. And if you have the ESV open in front of you, you'll see that the ESV margin note points out that hevel literally means mist or vapor.

It's ephemeral, doesn't last, it's fleeting. You know, you wake up early in the morning on an autumn day and there's a mist covering the grass and the hills. It's settling between the trees and on your early morning drive or walk. It's so thick you can only see a few yards ahead of you.

But in an hour or so, the sun rises and the mist that once seemed so thick and impenetrable is gone. That's what hevel means. It's fleeting. It's ephemeral, like a mist, like a vapor. It doesn't last.

And according to the preacher or teacher whose voice runs throughout this book, all of human life is hevel. Everything is fleeting. Nothing lasts.

[2 : 0 4] And now, that observation is undeniably true, isn't it? In chapter 1, Ecclesiastes held up the permanence of the created order in order to highlight and expose the impermanence of human endeavors. The sun continues to rise and set. The rivers continue to run to the sea. And what of our human toil? It fades and is forgotten like mist dispelled by the dawn, like a vapor dissipating in the breeze. Now, when we're young, this observation feels a bit overly pessimistic, right? I mean, nothing lasts. You know, sure, we're going to lose our hair, but nothing lasts. But at the same time, isn't the pressure that we feel, even in our youth, to get the most out of life, to not miss out, to live while we're young?

Is that impulse not just testimony to the truth of what Ecclesiastes is showing us?

That everything is fleeting. So, we have to live life while it lasts. Now, if that's true, if everything is fleeting, how should we live?

How do we find lasting meaning or joy in a fleeting world? In the mists of human existence and human toil, is there any substance to be found? The poet Mary Oliver once famously said, what will you do with this one wild and precious life?

Well, in chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes, we're taken on a quest, a quest to try to figure out how to find joy and meaning in a fleeting world. We're sort of taken along as Ecclesiastes engages in a series of existential tests to try to find substance and satisfaction. And as we'll see, this quest feels and sounds surprisingly contemporary. It's as if Ecclesiastes could be any one of us today. So, we're going to follow him on this quest, on these tests, and see if we can find any lasting meaning or joy in a fleeting world. So, let's look at the first approach, the first test in verses 1 through 11. And first, we're going to explore the life lived for pleasure. Let me read verses 1 through 11. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself.

[5 : 16] But behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, it's mad, and of pleasure, what use is it? I searched my heart. 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 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 forest 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 sons of men. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

Also my wisdom remained with me, 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. 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.

So where does the life lived for pleasure lead? Well, Ecclesiastes gives us his conclusion right up front in verses 1 and 2. I said of pleasure, what use is it? This also is vanity. In other words, living for pleasure in a fleeting world leaves us empty. Now, lest we think that Ecclesiastes is just some prude moralist casting judgment on something he hasn't actually tried. In verses 3 through 10, he tells us just how far he went down the road of experimenting with the so-called good life.

He says in verse 10, whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. Wine, laughter, sex, he tried it all. But again, lest we think Ecclesiastes was simply a foolish frat boy living a life of senseless debauchery, think again. After all, it doesn't take much wisdom, right, to realize that a life of excessive hedonism is empty and miserable. He was powerful, he was influential, he was rich, he achieved the life that many only dream of achieving. He reached the top. And at the top, he admits in verse 10 that yes, there was pleasure. But at the same time in verse 11, he realized that he hadn't actually gained a thing.

[8 : 31] It was all still empty. He was still just grasping at wind. So we see then that living for pleasure, even the most refined and sophisticated pleasures in life will never be the path to lasting joy. And if we think that the next promotion or the bigger house or the more influential friend circle or getting the more prestigious degree will finally fill our souls with lasting meaning or joy, if we live that way, then we too are striving after the wind.

Living for pleasure in a fleeting world will only leave you empty, Ecclesiastes says. And sooner or later, many people make that same discovery, don't they?

And Ecclesiastes, having realized the emptiness of the pleasure-centered life, moves on to his next experiment. He now takes a second approach in verses 12 through 17. And the second approach is not the pleasure-centered life, but the wisdom-centered life. Let me read verses 12 through 17.

So, I turned 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, 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 perceived that the same event happens to them all. 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 also is vanity. For of 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 wind. So, Ecclesiastes in verse 12, having realized that as far as pleasure goes, there is no more that can be done than he and the other kings have done before him. Realizing that, he turns to wisdom, right? Perhaps accumulating wisdom will provide the substance that we are looking for in a fleeting world. Leaving material pleasures behind, we will cultivate the life of the mind, the life of culture, the life of well-living, right? Because in the ancient world, wisdom wasn't just intellect, it was skill for living the good life. And in doing so, Ecclesiastes discovers two things.

[11 : 46] First, he discovers that it is much better to be wise than to be a fool. He says the wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. So, yes, there is benefit to wisdom.

And the book of Ecclesiastes will never deny that, as if to say, if you have the choice between being wise and acting in wisdom and being a fool and acting in folly, choose wisdom every time.

But he then also makes a second observation. The wise, with all of his or her wisdom, will die just like the fool. Wisdom, with all of its relative value, is utterly powerless in the face of death. Can you imagine Ecclesiastes with his degrees on his wall? There they hang with all their impressive pedigree. Master, doctor, they proclaim him. Look at the books he's written that line his shelves, volume after volume. Read all the endorsements on the front pages. A truly groundbreaking mind, they say, pioneering, paradigm-shifting work. Look at all the conferences and fest shrifts put together in his honor. And now see Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, old age setting in, his mind starting to fade, and death with its dark shadow begins to stretch across his vision.

Has any of it changed the fact that he will die just like the fool? And what does the dark door of death hold for him? What will any of his worldly wisdom win him in the face of death? So I hated life, Ecclesiastes says. In other words, a deep bitterness starts to set in.

Because he will die. And sooner rather than later, his ideas will be forgotten. And his now paradigm-shifting approaches will be rendered obsolete. His books will gather dust, and he himself will be forgotten, just like the fool. Yes, wisdom was better than folly. But all his labors of mind, all his striving for insight, the discipline, the hard work, the sacrifices, what service is it to him now?

[14 : 38] No. It's nothing but a bitter taste to his soul. For in the end, all his wisdom fails him.

When the vapor of his life is ready to be blown away, all of his wisdom is just as ephemeral. Will it be any different for you, friend? Will your wisdom-centered life be anything more than striving after wind when death comes? And in that moment, will your ultimate end be any different than the fool?

Living for wisdom in a fleeting world will only leave you bitter in the end. But immediately, we raise another possibility, don't we? Surely, the answer to our vaporous life, our mist-like existence, isn't personal or individual, right? It's about the legacy that we leave behind us, isn't it? In a fleeting world, we may not be able to satisfy our souls with pleasure.

We may not be able to cheat death with our wisdom, but at least we can leave a legacy that will enhance future generations. Isn't that where substance is to be found in a fleeting world? Leaving a legacy?

Ecclesiastes is also driven to this point, actually. And this brings us to his third test, his third attempt to find lasting joy in a fleeting world. In verses 18 through 23, he considers whether leaving a legacy is the answer he's been looking for. But quickly, he realizes that this path, too, is empty. Let me read verses 18 through 23.

[16 : 26] 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 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, and his work is a vexation.

Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. Brutally honest, isn't he? If you live your life to leave a legacy, if legacy is your hope in a fleeting world, consider, says Ecclesiastes, you cannot control what the next generation will do with your legacy.

There's no guarantee that they will be wise. They are just as likely to be fools and squander it all away. I saw a statistic recently that most inheritances are depleted within one to four years.

But then we might ask, well, okay, what about really wealthy families, right? Like, sure, you get a couple thousand dollars from, like, Uncle Bob. Yeah, that might not last you very long. But, like, what about the really wealthy families? Surely that's a legacy that lasts, right?

[18 : 13] Again, the just rapid squandering of millionaire inheritances is also just vastly well documented. Statistics show that the majority of family wealth disappears within just two to three generations.

But that's just money, you say. What about wisdom and character? But isn't that an even more fragile thing? You can hire an estate lawyer to try to protect your material wealth from being taken for granted and wasted by your following generation. But there is no legal mechanism to guarantee that your family or your community will not simply squander or ignore whatever good you try to achieve. Our legacy is just as fleeting and ephemeral as anything else, perhaps even more so.

So, where do we find lasting joy in a fleeting world? Living for pleasure? Living for wisdom? Living for legacy?

Do any of these things actually last? What do we gain from all our toil? What do we gain? Nothing, Ecclesiastes says.

So, what's the answer? When we see that we gain nothing from our toil, how do we live? Denial? Just keep charging forward, ignoring the fact? Despair?

[19 : 51] Well, Ecclesiastes shows us one more possibility, and this possibility is very different from all the rest.

So far, we've been asking, how do we get some lasting gain for all our toil? But this last exploration takes a different approach altogether.

Ecclesiastes begins to ask, what if life isn't about gain? What if it's about gift? What if lasting joy and meaning isn't something that I can achieve?

But what if it's something that I have to receive? Listen to this realization in verses 24 and 25.

There's nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. For a moment, Ecclesiastes breaks through the imminent frame of a life lived solely under the sun.

[21 : 17] For a moment, Ecclesiastes says, what if there's more to life than what my effort and endeavors can achieve? What if life isn't a game to be played for gain?

What if life is meant to be a gift? A gift to be received from the hand of God. In verse 24, he affirms the goodness of eating and drinking and working.

Those same pursuits that he just explored in verses 1 through 23, but he affirms these things now, not from the perspective that we're autonomous, sovereign agents trying to make our mark on the world, trying to wrest some sort of existential prophet from the fleeting passage of time.

No. The perspective is now shifted. Ecclesiastes realizes that lasting joy can only be found when we acknowledge that we are creatures before a Creator.

And as verse 25 puts it so eloquently, apart from God, who can eat and who can have enjoyment? Ecclesiastes has tried to do it apart from God.

[22 : 38] He's amassed wealth and pleasure. He's accumulated great wisdom and knowledge. He's constructed a legacy to pass on. But without God, it led him to despair.

Because apart from God, who can eat and who can have enjoyment? Only in fellowship with God, only as creatures rightly related to our Creator, can we truly eat and find enjoyment, he says.

But why? Why is that the case? Well, at least two reasons, I think. First, only in relationship with God do we experience the true purpose of the gifts.

First, eating, drinking, working. These things are meant to lift our hearts to God in praise.

They're meant to be streams that lead us higher to a deeper fountain of joy. But apart from God, we have to use eating and drinking and working as tools to secure our legacy, to secure our joy, to secure our permanence.

[23 : 53] And when we see those things as tools in that way, it immediately leads to this scarcity mindset where I have to amass more and more of the means of production and labor for myself and for my tribe, right?

Because my life literally depends on it. So I control and I amass and I have to gain more and more for me and for my people because my soul depends on it.

So now, apart from God, these things are no longer gifts to be enjoyed and to be shared, but they become commodities to hoard and to wage war over and to kill for.

But in relationship to God, as creatures rightly related to our Creator, we see these things as gifts.

They are not ours. We didn't achieve them through our own effort, and thus they are not mine to hoard.

[25 : 00] In fact, my mindset now is just the opposite. These are gifts for everyone to enjoy. Creatures rightly related to their Creator will be passionate about every human being having just and right access and opportunity to enjoy the gifts of eating and drinking and working.

We'll be passionate about every human being enjoying these gifts, just as we do. Only in relationship with God do we experience the true purpose of the gifts.

But only in relationship with God, this is the second point, only in relationship with God do we experience the permanence of the giver. Under the sun, everything is fleeting.

Nothing lasts. But God, the Creator, is not under the sun. He is transcendent and permanent, faithful and unchanging.

And as the Hebrew poets in the Psalms sing over and over again, the Lord and only the Lord can rescue His people from the yawning power of the grave.

[26 : 22] How does their logic go? It goes like this. If the eternal Creator chooses to love His people, then by definition He loves them with an eternal love, because He's an eternal God.

And thus as objects of His eternal love, they will be loved eternally without end. Therefore, they must live beyond death, because His eternal love demands it and makes them so.

But this raises a great question, does it not? Why are we apart from God? Why are humans not in this fellowship with God, our Creator?

Why can't we just sort of slip back into it? Well, it's not that easy. The reason why humans are not in fellowship with their Creator, the reason why we're apart from God, is because of what the Bible calls sin.

Listen to verse 26, the last verse of our chapter. For to the sinner, it separates us from God, our Creator, and it consigns our lives to emptiness and death and despair.

[28 : 06] You see, the journey that we've been on in chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes is actually the journey of human fallenness and sin. Look back at the opening verses, verses 1 through 11.

You know, it's fascinating how many linguistic echoes there are there in that passage back to Genesis 1 and 2. You can catch them. You can catch them. Gardens, parks, trees, pools.

Ecclesiastes is describing himself as trying to recreate Eden, trying to build himself a lasting paradise, but his human efforts can't get him there.

Why? Because the problem is, he's trying to create Eden without God. He's trying to be the creator rather than worshiping the creator. And we all do the same.

We all usurp God's rightful place in our lives and become our own lords. And what's the result? Not just emptiness, as our self-made Edens fail to satisfy.

[29 : 10] The result is ultimately death. In verses 12 through 17, we see that no matter how wise we become, sin inevitably leads to death. The wise, the fool, they're no different.

Under the curse of sin, we all deserve death. Not just physically, but spiritually. And this spiritual death, this alienation from God, lasts forever.

Because offending an infinite God justly calls for an infinite penalty. And so verses 18 through 23 speak not just of death, but of despair.

And friends, it is an infinite despair that sin and death bring. Sin separates us from God. And separation from God, who is the source of all goodness and light and life, to be separated from God is by definition unending despair.

So how do we get back? If we're apart from God in our sin, how can our fellowship with God be restored? So we can enjoy His permanence and enjoy the purpose of His gifts.

[30 : 33] But here is where Ecclesiastes' journey ends. He has seen that fellowship with God is the only way to know lasting joy in a fleeting world. And He's seen that human sin separates us from that God in futility and despair.

But He does not yet see how that fellowship can be restored. He does not yet see how our sins can be forgiven. Listen again to verse 26.

For to the one who pleases Him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. But to the sinner, He's given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God.

And then He says what? This is vanity. It's striving after wind. Wait, what? That is also vanity and striving after wind? How so?

I thought we just found the answer. I thought we just said that fellowship with God is the key to lasting joy. Now it's all vanity, just like the rest of our human endeavors? Why? Because what Ecclesiastes points out in verse 26, it's to the one who pleases God that God will give wisdom and knowledge and joy.

[31 : 48] But to the sinner, God will give futility. And all their good will go to the one who pleases God. Do you see why all this is empty and striving after the wind?

Because of this simple reality, friends, who of us can actually please God? Yes, the principle is sound.

The one who pleases God will receive his gifts. But has anyone actually lived a life completely pleasing to God? Ecclesiastes actually has the honesty to admit that if it does all come down to who pleases God and who doesn't, then it's empty after all.

Because Ecclesiastes is honest enough to admit that sinful human beings like himself and like you and me, we can't actually do it. We would all rather try to be our own creators and build our own Edens than humble ourselves before God and please him.

And surprisingly, the New Testament makes that exact same point. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 3, there's no distinction.

[32 : 59] There's no distinction between the religious and the irreligious, the good and the bad. By your own endeavors, you cannot fix your relationship with God.

You can't play a religious game just like we played the pleasure game and the wisdom game and the legacy game. We can't play a religious game and earn enough profit through our moral and religious toil to heal the tear of human sin.

It can't be done. It can't be done. And if you and I think that we can save ourselves that way, then we are just striving after the wind.

But there's another way. What Ecclesiastes 2 doesn't yet see from his location and his perspective in redemptive history, what Ecclesiastes 2 doesn't yet see is that God's grace and God's gift are even more radical and extravagant than this ancient sage could ever imagine.

Because when the fullness of time had come, hundreds of years after Ecclesiastes wrote his honest wrestlings with human fallenness and sin and a fleeting world, when the fullness of time had come, God the Creator didn't just offer us His gifts.

[34 : 41] He offered us Himself. You see, in Jesus Christ, God the Creator took creaturely human flesh. Jesus lived a life in our place that perfectly pleased His heavenly Father.

And in the person of Jesus Christ, that meant perfect fellowship between God and humanity was restored. And what do we see in the life of Jesus?

He ate. And He drank. And He worked. He fully enjoyed the good gifts of His Father.

So much so that Jesus was criticized by the religious authorities of His day. He's a glutton and a drunk, they accused Him of. Here in Jesus, humanity and God, creature and Creator were finally reconciled.

But in order for sin to be fully overcome, the penalty of sin had to be paid. The justice of God against evil had to be satisfied. So Jesus willingly stood, not just in the place of us as creatures, but He stood in the place of us as sinners.

[35 : 55] And on the cross, Jesus tasted not just death, but that infinite despair of our sin.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He cried. Was there any human being who knew more turmoil, more vexation, more despair of soul than Jesus when He was crucified?

He entered in to the vanity and emptiness of our sin on the cross. And having died for sin and being buried, on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead.

Jesus' resurrection was the final step in overcoming human sin and restoring fellowship between God and His creatures. In the resurrection, sin and death were now finally and fully overcome because sin had been paid in full on the cross.

Death could no longer hold Him. Death was now a legal sentence that no longer stuck on Jesus because there was no sin for it to claim.

[37 : 06] It had no hold on Him. And so the new creation, the life of restored and healed creation, could begin when Jesus rose from the dead.

And the good news is this, friends. What God did in Jesus Christ, He did for you, for sinners. He became a creature for you, His creature.

He stood in the place of sinners for you, a sinner. He rose again to newness of life for you so you could know newness of life. Jesus did all this for you in your place as a gift.

Pleasing God is not something you or I could ever achieve by our own toil, but we can receive what Jesus did for us as a gift. You can entrust yourself to Him through repentance and faith.

And when you do, God will be pleased with you. Now, not on the basis of your work, but on the basis of Jesus' work.

[38 : 07] Though you are a sinner, the Father will see you in the Son's perfect righteousness and be pleased. Friends, there's only one way to find lasting joy in a fleeting world.

It's not through pleasure or wisdom or legacy. It's only through receiving God's gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ, being united to Him. And when you do, then eating and drinking and working will finally become for you what they were always intended to be.

Loving gifts from your loving Creator. Gifts to be enjoyed. Gifts to be shared. Gifts that lead us back to the Giver in praise and gladness.

Gifts that, yes, will last forever. Let's pray. Father in heaven, help us as a church, as those who have been reconciled to You through Your Son, to affirm the goodness of Your everyday gifts.

May we be a people who take deep gladness in eating, drinking, and working. And would we be the people who look out at our world and ask, where can these gifts be enjoyed more fully, more justly, more permanently?

[39 : 38] Father, for those who are beginning to realize that they are apart from You, their loving Creator, grant them the courage and the faith to turn from trying to be their own Creator and creating their own Edens, to repent from that, and to trust in Christ, our Savior, our Lord, our King.

Pray this in His mighty name. Amen. Amen.