



All is Vanity: Specifics

Ecclesiastes 1:12 – 2:26

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The section of the book of Ecclesiastes that we will be looking at this morning is 1:12 – 2:26. The subject of this section is the same as 1-11 although towards the end the author begins to give us his answer to the problem of the vanity of life under the sun. So, we are going to get some instruction on how to live with joy in light of the fact that so much of life under the sun is meaningless. I remind you that the phrase “under the sun” refers to this earthly life in a fallen world that ends with death. While it is not the whole story, there is something about life in this fallen world that is futile and meaningless because it ends in death and nothing that we do has any lasting significance. When we began our study in Ecclesiastes last week we saw that the biblical answer to the sad reality that Ecclesiastes dwells on is the eternal life that Jesus has won for his people. But we also saw that the vanity that Ecclesiastes is talking about is part of our experience because our lives are so short and so temporary.

Now as I said, the basic subject is the same in the verses we are going to look at this morning. What is new is that the author of Ecclesiastes, who calls himself the Preacher, gets into specifics. The same basic subject, but worked out in specifics and then the beginning of an answer. That is what we have in these verses.

A couple of things before we get to the specifics. First notice that the negativity lasts for quite a while. We must read through the majority of 2 chapters of negativity until we get some positivity beginning at 2:24. That is a lot of darkness before we get any light. But it is important to realize that the Preacher has done this on purpose. He wants us to sit in the darkness for a while. He wants us to enter deeply into what he is saying. He wants us to feel the vanity of life under the sun. We are not

used to that. We live in a happy-clappy world. We live in a society in which comedy is an important genre. We do not avoid the negative all together, but we are in a hurry to get to the laughter and the good times. The author of Ecclesiastes is not in a hurry to leave the subject of the futility of life under the sun. And by that he is saying, "You need to understand this deeply and you need to really experience the vanity of life under the sun." It needs to make a powerful impression upon us so that we will be able to appreciate the answers that he will give.

Another point that comes from the fact that he dwells on one subject for a long time, is that he is leading us in a sustained reflection. He wants us to think deeply about this. He wants us to ponder it. He wants us to dwell on it for a while. This is the nature of wisdom literature and it is the nature of wisdom. Wisdom comes from sustained reflection about life. Wisdom comes from deep thought. And in this Jesus is our ultimate example. Jesus is the ultimate teacher of wisdom. In Colossians 2:3, Paul writes of Jesus that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Jesus. He also prays in Colossians 1:9 that Christians "be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Jesus came to give us wisdom, among many other things. But that takes thought on our part. It takes pondering. It takes sustained reflection.

There are lots of things that keep us from sustained reflection in our day and age. There is an awful lot being written today about the effect of our screens and our devices on our ability to concentrate and to stick with one topic for any extended period of time. We are being trained to be shallow. We are being catechized in superficiality. We are being inoculated from deep thought. This is the opposite of wisdom.

The Preacher here by his extended reflection on one theme is calling us to resist the shaping influences of so many things in our world that conspire to take away our ability to think deeply on one topic for an extended period of time. We are called to be wise and we do not grow in wisdom if our ability to concentrate is weakened by the way we click our way through the internet or stare at our television screens.

So, we are going to follow the lead of the Preacher and think again of the vanity of life under the sun and consider the specifics that he brings

before us. He is on a mission to see if there is anything in life that leads to true and lasting gain. Remember how he had introduced the idea of gain in 1:3 “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” He is talking about life in this world that does not factor in eternity or God. That is what he means by under the sun. Is there any real gain from anything that we do under the sun? He is talking about lasting joy. He is talking about lasting satisfaction. He is talking about a meaning that gives fulfillment to the soul.

So, he considers wisdom and knowledge. Can he find the gain that he is looking for in wisdom and knowledge? Now wisdom and knowledge are certainly important and much has been accomplished through them. Think of the importance of acquiring knowledge in the history of the human race. Think of how far we have come in making life more comfortable and pleasant. And wisdom – understanding how life works and understanding how to deal with people – it has often led to pleasant and comfortable lives. Our world greatly values education and all the different disciplines for growing in wisdom and knowledge. In the minds of many these are the key to the good life.

But has all of that dealt with the problem of vanity and futility and meaninglessness? There is lots of this-worldly wisdom. There is lots of knowledge. But what about the kind of gain that the Preacher is looking for – meaning that transcends death – joy that remains, knowing that our time on earth is short. The Preacher concludes that “this also is but a striving after wind” (1:17). And he continues in 1:18 “For in much wisdom is much vexation and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

This is the point of everything in in Ecclesiastes we have covered so far. The happy clappy people don’t know of this sorrow. They watch their sitcoms and play their video games and say, “Life is good.” It’s the people who study and think deeply, who, more often, are aware of what is wrong with the world and who are more often aware that all that they do is ultimately meaningless. It is the people who think about the meaning of life who come to the conclusion that life has no meaning.

What Ecclesiastes is saying is that this-worldly-wisdom and knowledge do not bring the gain that he is looking for. He says, “It is striving after

wind.” He is striving for something. He is searching for something that will give him joy. He is looking for something that will not end up being vain and meaningless. And he says that he did not find it in wisdom and knowledge. To try to find meaning in knowledge and wisdom is like striving after the wind. Striving after the wind is trying to grasp the wind. It is trying to hang on to the wind. It is an exercise in futility, like trying to package fog.

It is important to understand that he is not discouraging learning and education and study and deep thought. After all he is writing this book to educate his reader. Ecclesiastes is part of wisdom literature, which is all about growing in wisdom. What he is saying is that you cannot find the gain he is talking about through knowledge and wisdom. No matter how useful education is in this world, we still die and are forgotten. It does not give the satisfaction that he is looking for.

In chapter 2, he continues his search for a way of escaping the vanity or futility of life. He tries pleasure. He is looking to find something that “was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (2:3). He is looking for a way to live his life that does not end up being empty and vain and useless. So, he tries pleasure. He was a king. He had money. He had power. He had the resources to fill his life with pleasure. He tried wine. He tried comedy; he speaks of laughter (verse 2). He tried luxury. He built houses. He planted gardens and parks and vineyards. He bought slaves so that he would be free from the mundane tasks of life. He had great possessions. He had tons of money. In 2:10 he says “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....”

He could be describing life in North America. This is what drives most of the people of our society. This is consumerism – seeking the pleasure of more and more things. Living for luxury. Striving for every pleasure and delight imaginable. And this is a temptation for all of us who live in the affluent West – to look to the things that money can buy to make us happy and to give us satisfaction. And we can certainly experience a lot of pleasure, but it did not give the author of Ecclesiastes the gain that he was looking for. He says in 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 the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

Next, he considers “wisdom and madness and folly.” He compares the wise man with the fool. He admits that “there I more gain in wisdom than in folly.” Better to be a wise man than a fool. Better to live in “light than in darkness.”

Now this is a distinction that is very important in the wisdom literature. Wisdom is all about learning to be wise instead of being a fool. But Ecclesiastes makes the point here that in the end it does not matter whether one is wise or a fool because in the end both die and are forgotten. Verse 16, “So of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool.” He goes on to say, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.”

Finally, the Preacher mentions the fact that no matter what he has accomplished in this life, it will be left to the man who comes after him and that man may well be a fool. This kind of situation happens most often in families. There are plenty of stories in which a father has built up a business and it is left to his children who are fools and who squander what they have not worked for. This too is something that the Preacher has noticed about life under the sun and it is another reason that that life under the sun is meaningless and futile.

Now the Preacher wants to convince us of the point that he is making and repeating and emphasizing. He wants to persuade us of what he is affirming about life under the sun. He is assuming that many of his readers are quite satisfied with what they gain from their work and from their lives. The problem that he is addressing is that people are too easily satisfied with a gain that is really no gain. He wants us to ponder what he has written so that we will be convinced that we give more significance to our work and our pleasures than we should. He wants us to realize that we are attaching too much significance to what is ultimately meaningless.

He wants us to realize that if we think of life only for the gains of this earthly life, if we see our purpose only in terms of this earthly-life, we are living for something that is ultimately meaningless. And he wants us to think seriously about the fact that much of what we work for and strive for is ultimately frivolous because, after our death, it will disappear and be forgotten.

And so, he wants us to ask the question with respect to our own lives. We are being called to think about our own lives. We are being directed by the Word of God to think of our lives from the perspective of, say, 100 years in the future. Think about the gains that you are seeking in your life – think about what you are working toward – think about what gives you a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Think about the things that give you pleasure. Think about your motivations as you get up in the morning. Think about your life and what really gives you a sense of accomplishment and purpose in life. What are our goals? What do we dream about? Most of us want to get ahead financially. We want a nice home and nice things and financial security. Perhaps our reputation is very important to us and it makes us feel good when others look at us as successful. We want good relationships – husband, wife – kids, happy family, good friendships.

Now go in your imagination 100 years into the future. You will no longer be on this earth. Your money will be gone. Your accomplishments will be forgotten. Your wife or husband and children will be gone. If you are remembered at all, it will be dimly, as someone who lived a long time ago. The Preacher wants you to think these kinds of thoughts. He wants you and I to face the fact that death and time render this-worldly accomplishments meaningless. That is his purpose in the majority of these first two chapters of Ecclesiastes.

Why? Because he wants us to live in the light of the truth about the things of this earthly life. He wants us to face the facts. He wants us to live in the light of the fact of death. He is urging us not to place too much weight and significance on things that are only temporary. He is urging us not to live for things that have a significance only within the bounds of this early life. He is warning us against making temporary

things the focus of our lives. He is saying that we should not invest too heavily in the things that will die with us.

Do not make your life about making money. Do not make your life about your reputation. Do not make your life about having as much pleasure as possible. He is saying that all of these things should be secondary in your lives. None of them should be the meaning of your life because, if they are, you will one day come to understand that you have lived for nothing – your life has been empty and meaningless – it has all be a striving after the wind.

And the implication is that we need to be looking for a meaning beyond this earthly life. We need a perspective on life that includes more than our temporal existence. We need to focus on what will still matter after we die. The meaning of our life has to be something that is still important 100 years after we die. To find a meaning that is not trivial and ultimately futile, we have to think of our lives from a larger perspective than just this temporal physical existence which he refers to as life under the sun. We need to think about life in the light of God, who is above and beyond this earthly existence and who alone can give it a meaning that transcends death.

And so, in the last three verses of chapter 2, the author of the book mentions God for the first time. Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, 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, ²⁵for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For 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 to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind."

So, there is joy after all. The atmosphere has changed because God is now in the picture. The mood is no longer gloomy. Life is not pointless after all. It is pointless only if God is not taken into account. It is pointless only if it is limited to life under the sun - that is what is temporary and physical. But when our horizons are expanded to include God, we are including what lies beyond this temporal and physical

existence and that gives us a perspective that includes the spiritual and the eternal because God is both spiritual and eternal.

Let's follow the thought of the Preacher. It is important that by introducing God into the picture he does not take us out of the creation. God is above time and space. But we belong to the creation. And so, he first tells us to enjoy the life that comes from God. "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..."

He is saying that just because our this-worldly physical life is not enough to be the meaning of our lives does not mean that we should not enjoy it. Our this-worldly physical life comes from God and he has designed it to be enjoyable. And so, we should enjoy it. There is nothing wrong with enjoying life as a gift from God. There is nothing wrong with working to get ahead so that we not only survive, but experience much pleasure. The physical world is designed to delight and give pleasure. We are designed physically and psychologically to seek pleasure and comfort and to enjoy the things that we work for. Work itself is not only frustrating, it is also satisfying. The world is beautiful. Food tastes good. Loving and being loved is delightful. Money in the bank is satisfying. A warm house on a cold day and a cool house on a hot day are wonderfully comfortable. Getting together with friends is a great time.

Ecclesiastes is saying, "Enjoy the comforts and pleasures of life." He even says, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." Have a good time. Just don't forget God. Just don't make the pleasures and comforts and the attainments of life, the meaning of your life. That is what renders them meaningless and empty. If you live your life apart from God, it is empty and meaningless. But if you enjoy life as a gift from God – well, that how he designed it. When God finished creating he pronounced it all very good. This physical earthly life of work and attainment and learning and the fruits of our labor and laughter and beauty is all very good when enjoyed as a gift from God. But the moment God is excluded and ignored, it becomes empty and futile. It is designed to be enjoyed as a gift of God. If God is excluded, meaning disappears and all is vanity.

The last verse introduces the ideas of pleasing God and sin. “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 to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after the wind.”

You see pleasing God is the opposite of vanity, meaninglessness or futility. “For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom, and knowledge and joy...” Pleasing God – this is what is ultimately worthwhile. This what makes the difference between vanity and what is truly meaningful and significant. And, you see, the significance of what is done to please God does not end with death. It is not forgotten because God is eternal, and he remembers. What we do to please God has eternal significance. And so, this is the answer to the futility of life under the sun. If we live our lives only for this-worldly gain – pleasure, success, fun and comfort – none of that matters beyond our death and so it is ultimately meaningless. But if we live to please God, then that matters forever, and so, it is the kind of gain that the Preacher could not find in the world under the sun.

The opposite of one who pleases God is the sinner. Ecclesiastes says that “to the sinner [God] has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God.” He does not say how this works, but what is clear is that the lives of sinners are futile. Their lives are vanity and striving after the wind.

Now if we think of what Ecclesiastes says here about pleasing God in the light of the rest of the OT, we will realize that we have a problem. The life that he is calling us to live is beyond us. This book was written for Israel, the OT people of God. The great message of their story is that they were not able to please God. Ecclesiastes is telling them to live for God rather than living for the things of this world, but the history of Israel shows that they did not do that. They insisted on living the kind of lives that Ecclesiastes is insisting are meaningless lives. The story of Israel is the story of their inability to please God.

Ecclesiastes is telling us to do something that we cannot do. Ecclesiastes is recommending a path that we cannot walk. It tells us the answer to meaninglessness, but it does not tell us how we can live the kind of life

that pleases God. And so, it leaves us hanging. It does not tell us how we can be changed to live the kind of life that pleases God and so is meaningful.

But that does not mean that there is no answer. The OT points to the answer by speaking of a Saviour who would come and give his people hearts to obey. And the NT tells us who that Saviour is – Jesus Christ. It is only in Jesus Christ that we can do what Ecclesiastes is telling us to do. 1 Thessalonians 4:1 says “Finally, then brothers, we ask and urge you **in the Lord Jesus**, that as you received from us how you ought to **walk and please God**, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.” The pleasing God that Ecclesiastes is talking about is possible through Jesus Christ and the renewal that is in him.

In Jesus Christ we can live meaningful lives, because through him we can begin to please God. Let us hear what Ecclesiastes is saying in the light of Jesus Christ. Let us hear his point that a life lived apart from God is ultimately meaningless and futile. It is only through pleasing God that we have a gain that continues after death. This is what Jesus means when he speaks about seeking treasure in heaven rather than treasure on earth. The first two chapters of Ecclesiastes is intended to impress upon us the futility of seeking our treasure on earth, but also the joy of the life of pleasing God.