



ecclesiastes 2:17-26

¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ 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. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ 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.

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, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ 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 one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

commentary

The book of Ecclesiastes tells the truth about the meaninglessness of life under the sun. In it, Solomon recounts his life-long search for significance, purpose, and meaning in this life and finds that only by looking outside of this world, will anybody find true meaning. Anything humans pursue in this life and on this earth will only end in disappointment and is madness, like a chasing after the wind. The only way to catch true meaning is through life in Christ. After Solomon recognizes the immanence of death, this section of chapter 2 records the intensity of Solomon's depression as he writes about the fact that even what we work for cannot be enjoyed apart from God because of the worries and stresses it brings.

17 Solomon continues the misery he experienced looking back on his hedonistic experiment to find pleasure under the sun (i.e. in this life). His conclusion, as he hits the bottom of his depression, is that he hates life. The reason for this appears to be because he had sucked all of the marrow out of life, and in his young age, there is nothing left to pursue or try that might bring him some lasting happiness. Now, all of his work that was done for these purposes has left him weary and tired. Looking back on this, he sees how pointless it all was - a chasing after the wind.

18-19 His first reason for hating everything comes from looking at his irresponsible sons. He realized that everything he had gained would be left to

them! No matter what he worked to make better, or what achievements he earned, those after him were bound to either take credit for it, or mess them all up, which they did. Read ahead in the book of 2 Kings, and the Chronicles, and one can see the chain of destruction lasting for generations that was caused by their lack of wisdom and irresponsibility.

20-21 One can understand why Solomon is weary thinking of such things. His worries are so typical! He knows exactly what his goals are down to the detail. With the skill and attention to detail like that of a person with a mild case of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), he completes the job, stands to admire what he has done, and even can appreciate that everything is working like a finely-tuned and oiled machine. Then, he must pass what he has worked so hard on off to somebody else, hoping they are as wise. This new young “expert” overseeing the accomplishment makes adjustments and “improvements.” How dare they! Can’t they see what I did? Why fix a wheel that isn’t broken? Why complicate a good thing? Seeing our accomplishments improved on is hard on our pride, especially when someone who is touted as being “wise” takes over what we’ve poured our life’s energy into. This, as Solomon sees it, is the best case scenario of what might happen when he leaves everything to his successors.

On the flip side, the worse-case scenario is that the successor is a fool and does not have a clue how to administer or an appreciation for what was accomplished and he not only jacks up all that Solomon worked to accomplish, but he tanks the whole thing. Solomon, looking at his sons, probably felt like the dad who let’s his teenaged son take the restored classic car out for a spin. What will they do in their lack of experience? Who will get hurt? What will become of what I worked so hard for? Will they get the head-nods for my labor? Either way, the wise man or the fool, Solomon is going to be disappointed by whomever he leaves his fortune, power, and accomplishment. There is something very depressing about leaving what you own to somebody who has not worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

22-23 This phrase, “anxious striving” is interesting. Solomon is referring to the mental strain caused by everything we have worked for. Who hasn’t wondered “How can I work my way up the ladder?” Who hasn’t stayed late to impress the boss in hopes of recognition or a better position? Who hasn’t toiled for years, racking up student loans, studying for an education they’ll probably never use? Who hasn’t laid awake at night contemplating the next idea or worrying about the next paycheck? Who hasn’t dragged a problem into bed they should have probably left on their desk? Our “anxious striving” is why we refuse to take a day off, or if we do, we are drawn to our email or cell phones like an addict is drawn to his opiates. We are far too easily consumed by that which will only burden us. Instead of taking on the mindset of a faithful child who does not become so easily consumed, we resist the Savior whose yoke is easy and burden is light. Instead of loading our burdens on Jesus, we idolatrously load them upon ourselves, an attempt to play the role of our own personal Jesus. Achievement, success, wealth, and power become incredibly burdensome indulgences. We need to repent for our stubbornness toward Jesus who longs to consume us with the peace that passes all human understanding.

24-25 Solomon's point gets to the heart of the matter - there is nothing innate within our souls that will let us truly enjoy much of anything! Because of our drive to self-satisfy, self-indulge, even self-actualize, we only disappoint our own quest for satisfaction and we end up accomplishing the opposite of a better and more meaningful existence. The good news is, Jesus' greatest desire is to be your complete satisfaction. In fact, this is where His glory is. When he gives us gifts that meet our needs, (in these verses, they are food and drink), we are being physically and spiritually satisfied by him because we see his concern for us. Certainly, we may have worked hard to earn the money to purchase these gifts, but ultimately it was God who gave you the opportunity to have a job, to work hard, so you could earn money to have your needs met. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from a the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."¹ Make no mistake about it, all good things, and enjoyment we experience in them is a gift from God. Left to ourselves and pridefully congratulating ourselves for these things, toil and grief are our default.

26 The first part of this verse proves the Gospel is true. Only those who please God find true and lasting satisfaction. This begs the question, "What pleases God?" Scripture is clear that only through faith in Jesus Christ are we put into a right relationship with God. Faith, then, according to Solomon's gospel is finding our pleasure only in Jesus. It is the belief that not only does Jesus live, but his life gives us life. and it is the only source of our life.

The second part of this verse leaves a bit of confusion, although after a closer look, it does have to do with Solomon's thesis that everything under the sun is a chasing after the wind. The non-believer may read this verse and ask, "So everything I've worked for will eventually go to Christians?" The answer is ultimately, yes. What you are looking for in your hard work and toil - lasting satisfaction - can really only be experienced by those who love Jesus. Without Jesus, there is not fullness of life and the joy of work cannot be completely experienced.

Let us praise our God and Savior Jesus Christ for the life he gives us, even in our toil and labor.

personal reflection

Sunday - Take some time to think about the message today. How is your view of work going to change? List some ways God might help you "laugh on the job."

Monday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:17. What kind of images come to your mind when you think about this verse? Do any worries or stressful things come to your mind? How is Jesus the answer to a hated life?

Tuesday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:18-19. What are you trying to earn for yourself that you hope to get credit for? How might your own achievements end

¹ James 1:17

up disappointing you? Take time to thank Jesus that the only thing you really receive certain credit for is His work.

Wednesday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:20-21. How do you relate to these verses? Why is this meaningless?

Thursday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:22-23. Where is “anxious striving” evident in your own life? How is it effecting you? Take time to repent for being consumed with things other than Jesus and contemplate Matthew 11:20-29.

Friday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:24-25. What are the things God has put in your life that you enjoy? Take time to thank God to give you this enjoyment.

Saturday - Reflect on Ecclesiastes 2:26. If you are not a believer, you will never be able to experience what you are searching for in your work - lasting satisfaction. Only through faith in Jesus can this be experienced. As believers, you experience the great gift of enjoying things on earth because they are not the end. Jesus is and you know it! Ask God to continue to help you seek your satisfaction in Jesus.

group discussion

Ice Breaker: Take some time to describe your vocation to the group. What is the thing you hate most about your job and the thing you love most about your job (please refrain from gossip!!)?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 together.

1. Why is Solomon so glum in this passage?
2. Do you think Solomon has he lost all hope?
3. This passage recounts our striving and toil toward accomplishment and satisfaction. How much do you relate to what Solomon talks about regarding this?
4. What is an area of your life where you find you are trying to prove yourself? According to Solomon, is this possible?
5. How does Romans 4:1-8 shed light on our desire to gain credit/recognition?
6. Share a time you were consumed with something you were working toward. What was the affect?
7. How could being consumed with Jesus give us a different perspective?
8. Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 says that enjoyment in work comes from God. To what degree is this statement true: You do not earn any satisfaction for yourself because all satisfaction is a gift from God.
9. Read 2:26. How is a believer’s situation different than a non-believer’s as it concerns satisfaction found in work? In other words, according to scripture, what difference does Jesus make to your satisfaction?