

WORKED TO DEATH | ECCLESIASTES 2.12-26

We are continuing our series through the book of Ecclesiastes today; an attempt to find meaning in this life 'under the sun.' Over the last few weeks the pundit has taken us on attempts to find ultimate meaning in:

Knowledge | the pursuit of meaning in human thought: the belief that the solution to meaninglessness lies in progress and education.

Pleasure | the pursuit of experiences and things could fill the desire for purpose in our lives.

In these, the pundit keeps coming to the same conclusion: this is a striving after the wind. These things pacify us and keep us busy, but they cannot provide a basis of value for our lives. The best we have so far are ways to elevate yourself above others and to find moments of good in a world of monotony and suffering. This isn't enough. So the pundit is going to keep searching. Today he is going to investigate WORK. Can you organize your life in such a way that it can produce ultimate truth and goodness out of the toil? Here is his answer, 2.12:

OUTTHINKING LIFE

[12] 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. [13] Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. [14] 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 all of them. [15] 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. [16] 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! [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.

The author once again uses the position of king as an authoritative voice over the case: if the king can't find meaning, who can? He has altered his viewpoint a bit. He is no longer talking about pleasure and indulgence; getting the most out of life...now he is making this claim in response to wise living.

Kings have an upper hand when it comes to living wisely: they employ wise men. They surround themselves with people whose job it is, to weigh options and make decisions for them (wouldn't that be nice). All of the kings who ever lived, Solomon needed this help the least. He was himself wise...so He was a wise man, surrounded by wise men...and he says that even with all of this, living wisely was a vain pursuit.

When we talk about wisdom here, we are discussing something different than what Solomon addresses in Proverbs (*the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom*). That is a wisdom that is born out of an understanding of God...you start with WHO God is and you use that as the means by which you engage the world. If you remember, the pursuit of Ecclesiastes is to find meaning 'under the sun.' To start with the world we experience and to discover meaning here. The wise living that we are talking about today is: living under the belief that if you do things the right way you can avoid the struggles of life.

1. There is a healthy option (yoga, crossfit, or whatever the next thing is) that can hold back the results of aging.
2. There is a diet that can keep you from having any health issues.

3. There is a way to raise your kids that will assure that they all turn out great.
4. There is secret to investing money, finding the right job, setting up boundaries, building perfect relationships, feng shui, that can bring some ultimate peace or prosperity to your life.

The belief that these life hacks are out there is what drives the self-help movement. Self-help would be nothing if there wasn't the hope of some methodology that could solve the feeling of meaninglessness. So many jump from one fad to another, excited about the promises and initial feeling of 'this is it' only to come to the same realization a bit down the road 'this is another option, but it leads to the same place.' All of this is made clear by going to garage sales and seeing the dvds, workout equipment, Deepak Chopra books that were supposed to lead this life in a new direction.

There is no way to avoid the hard parts of life, which is the conclusion that the author comes to, but this doesn't mean that you should just live foolishly. **Living wisely isn't entirely empty.** He applies the common adage: wisdom gives light and allows someone to see where they are going, foolishness is stumbling around blind in the dark. In other words, making wise decisions does make a difference as to how you experience the world. There is benefit to being wise, it does help you elude many of the potential problems; you can mediate many of the ups and downs of life by making wise choices, good investments, marrying the right person, generally picking the right path. And yet...

Here is his struggle: fools still benefit from this life and wise people still suffer. There are some struggles in this life that no matter how wise you are you will not be able to overcome. There are lots of unknowns in life and you can't account for them all, but even if you could leverage your way out of every mistake hedge your bets...there are still inevitables that eventually get everyone: sickness, aging, and the great equalizer DEATH. This equalizer takes away the meaning and value of wise living...for those who have trusted in wise living, it leads to anger... *I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me.* Death steals the value that wisdom invests in.

But death is coming for us all; this is what the author means when he says: *And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.* There is inevitability to death (it will happen), and life is too short to make it worthwhile. One of the main reasons we gravitate toward moments and experiences (PLEASURE, which we talked about last week) is because the sacrifices of wisdom don't pay off in the span of our lifetime. If we are all headed toward our functions failing and these bodies wasting away, why not just do what you want; create your own idea of meaning. Live fast, die young, and have a good looking corpse...Life is short...fill-in-the-blank.

This is the general approach of our culture (which, by-the-way, is represented here as FOLLY). The reason it is folly is because it ignores reality...**it calls you to live as if death doesn't exist.** Most people, understanding little can be done, choose to simply live as if it isn't coming. We are both terrified of death and yet dismissive of it. It is why we are uncomfortable around death, why we hide it from our children, and why we worship youth (especially in popular culture). All of it allows us to pretend that life is not short.

The book of Ecclesiastes does not allow us to pretend. In the search for ultimate meaning under the sun, you have to factor in aging and death. Neither living wisely, nor throwing it to the wind and living in the moment do anything to help. Death just lingers out there...in our society we tend to not really have a place for it. Embracing death, the author comes to the conclusion:

I hated life, because there was no way to escape the inevitable vanity of it. No amount of wise living could avoid death itself, or the harsh reality that death places on all of life. The fact that death exists taints everything...if everything is going to die, nothing has lasting value.

In the face of this, some attempt to cheat death, by working hard and building something so great it outlasts them. The author addresses this next, v.18:

WORK IS A WASTE

[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.

Once again the author speaks from the point of view of Solomon, who at the end of his life was able to look at the great things he had built, realizing that his sons were not up to the task of continuing it. He knew that no matter how much wisdom he had when it was under his authority, the moment he passed it along, he couldn't assure its success.

In some ways it may seem that he is some sort of narcissist; sounds like a psychiatric appointment with a modern businessman: 'let it go,' bless your sons and move on. That misses the point. He is not saying that he is sorry that he has to give it over...but that this transition removes meaning from his life, from his toil (and to be clear from theirs...they gain something for which they did not work which takes away its value to them). He is desperately seeking an answer to the question: why work at all?

Some work for money, in order to purchase things or experiences, but he has already shot that down as a source of meaning. **Some work for power**, he will address this in a few weeks, but spoiler...it is also vanity. The one thing that he is willing to pursue, that may still have value is magnificence. Creating something great, making something that changes the world...that still seems to have potential meaning in it. Is there something so great that it could make sense out of or give meaning to our toil?

This is what fuels many workaholics. This is a celebrated trait: the obsessive desire to succeed. It is what many people who achieve great things in this life have: the need to accomplish. We often call it self-will. People who are bent this way are often able to shut out everything else (including the eventual results of their workaholicism) in order to zero in on the task and get things done. All of this comes out of a hope that some amount of work and accomplishment will be able to offset the sting of death.

I often wish the people starting out on this path could talk to the people who are a bit further along on it. History, even recent history, is filled with the stories of those who have reached their goals only to find that the sense of satisfaction they had invested so much in is not there. When faced with this, they often double down on the hope and become obsessed with making success happen: think Lance Armstrong's doping program or much of what fuels the urban business landscape with 70-80 hours a week the norm. **It is burying the empty feeling in more work; hoping that some kind of meaning is right over the next hill...**this is where we get the saying: *No one on their deathbed ever says they wish they had spent more time at the office.* We keep ourselves busy so we don't have to face reality.

The other response to finding that there is not a pot of gold on the other side of the work cycle is depression. Here in the NW we have Kurt Cobain, who made it, only to hate what that meant. But all of celebrity culture is filled with drug addiction and suicide, ways to cope with the reality that success has gained nothing.

The reason is because your work can never do anything grand enough to offset death (we are back on death again). If you can't somehow overcome or reverse the sting of death, then work becomes nothing more than the process of keeping yourself busy between birth and death. Success is nothing more than little victories in a war you have no chance to win. This is where Solomon got in his life, no amount of wise living or hard work and accomplishments, nothing he did could shake the reality that death would cancel out everything. What he needed to find, the only way to create meaning would be to somehow overcome death. For the first time in this book, he steps outside of the role of the skeptic and points us to hope. He stops forcing us to stare into the dark abyss and actually shines some light on the subject. Here is what he says, v.24:

WORKING TOWARD ETERNITY

[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.

This is one of the things I love about Ecclesiastes, it forces us to look at things we would otherwise avoid and will not let us look away until it is almost unbearable...then when it is right at the edge, when you are ready to give up, the author comes in and give a breath of fresh air; a reminder that the search for meaning is not futile...that joy is possible in this life. The secret is: acknowledging what our work (and ultimately our life) is for.

He admits, after all of his doom and gloom, that it is possible to eat and drink and find enjoyment in toil. The key is God, *apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?* We were created to be worshippers of Him, creation responding in joyful thanks to the Creator. We see this by looking at Genesis 2. In Genesis 2 we see God create man and He places him in a garden, v.15:

[15] The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. [16] And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." 15-17

We were created to work (Eve was created as a helper – to help Adam work and worship). Before sin was ever here, work was part of this plan. This work was not for the sake or making money to live (God took care of all of their needs), nor was it necessary to create a meaning to overcome death (death wasn't part of our dna yet)...**WORK WAS AN ACT OF WORSHIP.** It was created as a way for people to live out their gratefulness to God in a tangible way. From the outset, Adam was told: if you choose to do this on your own, to try to find meaning in the world rather than in your relationship to the Creator, **IT WILL LEAD TO DEATH.**

Then we have Genesis 3. This is the story of how death came into the world. Adam and Eve decided that waiting for joy to filter through God required dependence and patience and it was right there to be had; they grabbed the fruit, which is really the same as us grabbing at whatever we think will satisfy us apart from God. Sin enters the world and death becomes part of our reality, our work is disconnected from its original purpose. People toiled in this death for a long time before God intervened and gave them a new reason to work and a law to work by...the OT is the story of God reconnecting life to Himself. Death still lingered. The sacrificial system was helpful, it was a band aide on the gaping wound of death. It would not be enough.

Jesus comes. Jesus acted to undo what the first Adam had done (Romans 5 calls Him the second Adam). So he took on the temptation of the flesh, the desire to have control over accomplishment, to find meaning in His life on this earth and He rejected it (this is what the temptation of Satan in the desert was all about). He is not only victorious in righteousness, but He then goes to the cross and dies so that He can undo the power of death over our lives and work. Hebrews 2 tells us:

[14] Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 14-15

Without Jesus death is a lifelong slavery (which is what Ecclesiastes has been showing us). It is a hopeless attempt at getting out from under the burden of vanity. We can't do, no one ever has...except Jesus. In His death, He gave Himself over to pay the debt of sin, to conquer death...He invites us to share in His victory. What does all of this have to do with how we live our life and work?

We can lay down the burden of trying to outthink or outwork life; the key to finding what we are longing for has already been given to us. It isn't in avoiding struggle, it isn't in doing something great to overcome it...the key is this: connecting our life to the worship of God. Seeing everything we do as a means to bring Him glory; to thank Him for what He has done.

In this, we receive. The pundit says it this way: *For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.* This is the part that we have a hard time believing. We keep grabbing the fruit, we keep trying to create meaning, because we refuse to trust that the service of God will produce. Here's why: because in the short term it isn't easy. Work will never be easy, but when we attach it to these little gains, weekly paychecks and to do lists we can feel like we are making a difference (even in failure we can at least believe that we are trying). God calls us to attach our work to eternity. To do this means giving up some temporary happiness for the sake joy; some immediate ideals in return for knowledge and godly wisdom; to trade success for faithfulness.

It also means, through Jesus, we have the ability to have our work transformed from vanity into something that lasts. The last verse here is actually pretty amazing. It says: *the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God.* In one way he is reiterating what has been said: death makes work nothing more than gathering and collecting, spinning the wheels, ...but then he adds that ALL OF THIS WILL BE GIVEN TO THE ONE WHO PLEASES GOD. In other words, there are recipients of the good work done on this earth. Work does live on past death...but only for those who live on past death.

This means that our work has the potential to be attached to eternity. The things that reflect the beauty and wisdom of God will be purified and pass over into the New Heavens and the New Earth. **Good work**

will survive and be the foundation for Heaven. Which means, there is good reason to work hard: both to worship God (in obedience and effort), but also to build and create for eternity. Jesus abolishing death gives us eternal life, but it also gives our life eternal significance. Working as worship is meaningful and gives our life purpose. We said the reason that work and wise living is futile in itself is because life is not long enough to pay off the investment, but eternity changes that. When Jesus invites us into His Kingdom he conquers physical death, but even more, he conquers the meaningless that death forces on us. The things He calls us to do: sacrifice, serve, love, to give of ourselves...these things seem horribly inconvenient to a life is short mentality. If there will always be more time to get the work done, to take a vacation, to do and create...then that changes how we work and use our time. We are going to expound on that in chapter 3, but I just want you to think about this for now:

The way you live your life right now is not aimed at the 70 or 80 years you have on this earth. You must live, work, and prioritize based on eternity. **This is what Jesus did.** His life was about obedience to the eternal plan of the Father. In John 17, He sums it all up saying:

*“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, [2] since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. [3] And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. [4] I glorified you on earth, **having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.** [5] And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. 1-5*

As Christians, we been unified to Christ and unified to eternity through Him. We have died to our short term view of the world to adopt His eternal plan. Everything that we do now has purpose beyond itself; meaning beyond its limits. This is one of things we come here every week to remember. The limits of our work and ability can be depressing; **it can force us to either give up or obsesses.** In Jesus, we have the ability to both work hard and to keep our identity separate from our work. As you come to communion today, do so to commit your effort to Jesus. Come recognizing that your work is part of what your living sacrifice, part of what has been unified with Him in His death. Thank Him for freeing you from the lifelong slavery that you would otherwise be stuck in. Commit yourself to accomplishing the work He has for you to do...even if you aren't sure what that is yet.

We will be working in heaven...it will be pure, and worshipful and meaningful. Let's do our best to practice that now.