

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:18-26

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

I’m dating myself a bit, but do you remember the big psychological push back in the 90’s? The power of positive thinking. It was, “If you think happy thoughts, then your life will be better and good things will come to you.” That’s not a sentiment stuck in the 90’s either. The character Eeyore in the Winnie the Pooh was written to teach kids that it’s harmful and bad to always be thinking, “Here’s what can go wrong in this situation right now.” And then there’s the old phrase, “Nobody likes a negative Nellie.” And that’s what makes it a splash of cold water in the face to read this section of Ecclesiastes. In a lot of ways, it’s a serious, serious downer with lots of gloom and doom.

Just check out how rocky the start to this section is. **“I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun. (v. 18)”** Now you may say, “You can’t say that. It’s too strong. It’s too harsh. Christians don’t talk like that.” There might be even more than one parent here who is cringing because you tell your kids, “Don’t use the word hate. It’s too strong a word.” And yet, there it is. I hated. Powerful language. Why? To get our attention. To take us by the lapels and get through to us. And so he says, “I hated all that I had toiled for under the sun.” He’s saying he hates his bank account. He’s saying he hates his retirement savings. He’s saying he hates his nice house, his tricked out chariot, and those beautiful gems he had bought for his wife. He hated all the things he had worked for.

How did he arrive to this fierce animosity? What we find out as we read the section is that he didn’t always feel that way about stuff. In fact, there was a time when he seems to have been pretty devoted to it. You might even say he loved all the stuff he

had worked for. He said he went to these lengths to get stuff, **“I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. (v. 19)”** He poured himself out for stuff because there was a time in the Teacher’s life when he believed a lie. He believed that if he sacrificed 12 hour days, life with cruel bosses, stress, awful hours, and vicious commutes to the god of stuff, that the god of stuff would bless him with enough happiness and peace and joy to make it all worth his while.

That kind of sacrifice to the god of stuff is alive and well today. Cell phone companies get this. It’s why they rolled out a bunch of new, expensive plans last week so that you can upgrade your phone every 6 months. Why would someone pony up hard earned money for this? The answer is found in a study that was conducted a couple of years ago. I want to read to you a statement from the author of the study, “I conducted an experiment to examine the similarities between some of the world’s strongest brands and the world’s greatest religions. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) tests, my team looked at subjects’ brain activity as they viewed consumer images involving brands like Apple and Harley-Davidson and religious images like rosary beads and a photo of the pope. We found that the brain activity was uncannily similar when viewing both types of imagery.”¹ Do you see what that means? For some, the iPhone is religion. It’s a god. Even brain scans show that.

That shouldn’t surprise us. Human history is riddled with people looking for ultimate satisfaction in the latest fashions, technology, or houses – all stuff. Do you know where it started? The mother of us all. Eve. It started when she looked to a thing - a piece of fruit - to satisfy the longing she felt in her soul. And from then on we’ve all had that draw – a tug even for Christians – to fill the void we feel in our souls with stuff so that we can feel whole and satisfied.

That’s exactly what the Teacher tried to do. And then he made a bitter discovery. All the stuff that he had poured out his life and energy to get... **“I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? (v. 18)”** Wow, did that bug him! It bugged him so much that he comes back and says the same thing in different words a verse later. **“A man must do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. (v. 19)”** Do you see what’s going on here? Do you see now why the Teacher hated his stuff. This is a case of love disappointed. Like a woman whose long time boyfriend runs out on her and then marries another man. Love disappointed. That explains the bitterness. He had worked so hard. He had had such high hopes for all the stuff that he had accumulated and then it bitterly came home to him that his stuff would abandon him. Worse yet, it was going to someone who didn’t deserve it and may well waste all of it.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/opinion/you-love-your-iphone-literally.html?_r=0

I knew a civil engineer a few years back. He had an incredibly successful career with a large construction firm. He rose to VP of the company in large part because he was blessed with a good mind and a strong work ethic. Then Alzheimer's kicked in. Before he knew it, he was in assisted living. His wife quickly followed. It was only a matter of a few years before he and his wife's assisted living facility drained the entire fund. Gone. Poof. And just when it seemed they needed it the most.

Do you see what the Teacher is teaching us? We can work and slave and strive and get until we're old and gray. And practically it's like pouring water into a sieve. Someday it will all leave us for someone else. Worse yet, it's horrible religion. Asking the latest tech, the greatest fashions, or the flashiest new sedan to fill the God-sized void in our souls will leave us bitter, disappointed, hateful, and lost. And this is where the tender heart of God comes in. God knows that left to ourselves we'd lead ourselves by the hand into an eternal pit where we'd spend our days bitterly hating the stuff we believed held so much promise for us. And so he sends the Teacher to wake us up.

Wake us up from what? Working too many hours? Being so comfortable in our demanding jobs? No. The Bible is not here to offer only practical solutions to our work/life balance. That's a choice you're free to make with Christian wisdom. The Bible is here to reclaim our souls for God. The Lord God is sending the Teacher to wake us up from materialism - the love of stuff - and replace it with something truly satisfying to our souls.

The Teacher begins to hint at what will satisfy our souls for eternity. See if you can catch it. **"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? (v. 24, 25)"** Did you see what the Teacher admitted? He admitted that there are people who have satisfied souls. They eat and they drink. They find satisfaction and enjoyment. So who are these people and how do we become like them? The Teacher hints at the answer. He says, "This is from the hand of God." In other words, it's not in our power to satisfy our souls. It's God's job. It's his thing. Or to say it like the Teacher said it. It's from the hand of God.

Think about that concept. There's a lot there. The hand of God. First of all, notice something important about it. God doesn't actually have a hand just like angels don't actually have wings. The concept, hand of God, is an anthropomorphism. It's assigning to God a human characteristic so we come to understand something about God. We picture angels having wings not because they actually have wings, but so that we understand they are fast. We picture God having hands so we understand something important about God. God is like a hand. He's present. He is active to do and to save.

So let me tell you what the hand of God did. The hand of God was present and active to do and to save. He was active to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. He saved by giving us the only thing that could fill the God-sized hole in our hearts: God

himself. What else could explain the cheek of God resting on that itchy hay in that ancient manger? And, yet, there he was! Bits of hay and all. Immanuel. God with us! God's hand in history. What explains his dishing out of forgiveness to prostitutes and tax collectors - the worst of the worst - like it would never run out? The hand of God was active in history for us to win all the forgiveness we'd ever need. And what else explains his cry from the cross, "It's finished"? The hand of God was active to do and to save and he did it.

Think of how poetic all of this is. The hand of a human reached up to a tree opening up a huge, gaping, God-sized hole in the human heart. And then the hands of God hung on another tree reversing all that damage by giving to us the only thing that would fill the God-sized hole in our hearts: God himself. And get this. This time those hands were no anthropomorphism. They were real. They were there. They were saving. He's our Immanuel, our God-with-us. Jesus Christ. Our Redeemer. He's the perfect lover and satisfier of our souls for eternity.

And not just saved and satisfied for eternity, but here too. Peter says in one of his letters that we've been redeemed from our empty way of life. It's not make a buck, buy some stuff, rest up on the weekend, and repeat until you die. It's live for Jesus at your job. It's live for Jesus when you buy stuff, when you rest up on the weekend, and live for Jesus again when you repeat. And it's all because the hand of God is here and is active to do and to save.

The Psalmist had it right in Psalm 17 when he wrote, **"And I - in righteousness will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness."** A person who says that has stepped out of the rat race and the striving for stuff and stepped into the light and the fullness of God. Today it's time to do that. It's time to see materialism and the race for stuff for what it is: empty, hateful, and disappointing in an ultimate way. And it's time to see God for who he is. He is the one thing that we truly need. He is the one thing that will satisfy our souls forever. And he also happens to be the one thing that Jesus delivered to us through his tree. We've been restored to God. Did you know that that's what heaven really is? It's finally being restored to the full presence of God. The Scriptures talk about that. The ancients called it the Visio Dei, which is Latin for the sight of God. There we will finally see him as he is. And I can promise you this: that sight will satisfy the deepest longings of your soul forever. Amen.