

**“THE GOOD LIFE”**

Even though we are only in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, we have repeatedly heard the Preacher state his main theme: “all is vanity.” And we have heard several of the arguments that he makes in support of this theme. In the passage that we studied last week, the Preacher declared that there is a crookedness to life that we cannot fix. That passage served as the introduction to the search that is described for us here in chapter 2, the Preacher’s search for what we might describe as “the good life,” or, in his own words, “what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few years of their life.” In this chapter, the Preacher tells us about three experiments that he made in his quest for the good life. He tells us about how he tried to find meaning in pleasure, in wisdom, and in work, all to no avail. And then, at the end of the chapter, he says something that catches us off guard. Up to this point, the tone of this book has been quite negative. But here the Preacher actually has something positive to say about life. After concluding that pleasure, wisdom and work are all vanity, he makes the following statement: “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” He spends most of this chapter telling us that pleasure, wisdom, and work cannot satisfy us, but then he tells us that we should find contentment in these things. This may sound contradictory, but it is actually an important window into the Preacher’s perspective on life, which is also the perspective that God wants us to have on life. We will have more to say about that perspective in a few moments, after we take a look at the Preacher’s three experiments in the search for meaning.

We begin our study of this chapter by looking at the Preacher's experiment with pleasure. He describes this experiment in two parts. First, he says that he gave himself over to the frivolous things in life. He tried to enjoy life, to find delight in laughter and wine and all the other choice things in life. But he is careful to qualify this by saying that he did not go overboard. His heart was still guiding him with wisdom. He was not a drunkard but a connoisseur, a man who cultivated an appreciation for the finer things in life.

People have been trying to find satisfaction through pleasure from the very beginning, ever since Eve was enticed by the pleasant look of the forbidden fruit. And there are a variety of ways in which we see people in our culture trying to find satisfaction through the pursuit of pleasure. Of course, there are extreme examples of hedonistic lifestyles, just as there always are in any culture. But there are also certain approaches that are more specific to our particular cultural context. One of these it how so many people in our society look for happiness through the consumption of products. This is so much of a part of our identity that we even identify ourselves by the name "consumers." People might not want to put it so bluntly, but it is clear that our culture operates on the assumption that one of the chief ways to find happiness in life is by buying things. And the thing about this is that it is the act of purchasing, not so much the products that we purchase, that is held out to us as the way to be happy. We buy things, but we quickly find ourselves losing interest in them and wanting to move on to our next purchase.

Another way in which we see the pursuit of pleasure in our culture is in our addiction to entertainment and distraction. People spend countless hours watching television and movies, surfing the internet, primping Facebook pages, playing computer games, texting, Twittering, listening to ipods, and more. A recent survey of students at four Christian colleges revealed that the average student spends over 18 hours per week on Facebook - the equivalent of a part-time job. [“Pulling Off the Mask,” Gordon College’s *Stillpoint*]

When you think about the amount of time that is spent on these kinds of things, it is a wonder that people have time for anything else. Of course it is not that these activities are inherently wrong, but the amount of time that people spend doing them demonstrates how much value they place upon them. People look to these sources of entertainment and distraction to find meaning and happiness in life.

There are a lot of ways in which we can look for significance through pleasure. But regardless of what we do, all of our attempts to find meaning in pleasure are ultimately met with the same problem that the Preacher found in his search. There is no pleasure in this life that is able to provide ultimate or lasting satisfaction. As one commentator puts it, “The more you hunt for pleasure, the less of it you find.” [Kidner, 31]

The second part of the Preacher’s attempt to find meaning in pleasure was a more refined approach. He did not limit himself to the frivolous pleasures of life. He also sought happiness through a variety of creative pursuits. He built. He planted. He accumulated. And his efforts in these areas were very successful. He accomplished a great deal in his life. Yet in the end he was not able to find any meaning in his

accomplishments. He had it all, but it was not enough to satisfy him. This reminded me of the famous quote from John D. Rockefeller when he was asked how much money would be enough. His tongue in cheek answer was, “Just a little bit more.” The Preacher could see through that way of thinking. He could see that no amount would ever be enough. As he evaluated his accomplishments in life, he realized that he had not accomplished anything of lasting value. In the end, it was all a striving after wind.

This brings us to the Preacher’s second experiment in his search for meaning: his experiment with wisdom. As we have noted several times already in our study of this book, the Preacher repeatedly describes himself in a manner that reminds us of King Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom. While there is debate over whether or not Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, there is no doubt that the author intends for us to associate him with that Solomonic type of wisdom. And Solomon’s wisdom truly was unsurpassed. We read in 1 Kings of how the queen of Sheba came to test him with hard questions, and how, after hearing his responses, she told him that his wisdom far surpassed the report that she had heard. She said that the people of Israel were greatly blessed to have such a wise king. She saw Solomon’s wisdom as a good thing, as a blessing from God.

The Preacher does not contradict this in what he has to say about wisdom in this passage. He agrees that wisdom is a good thing. He says that it is much better to be wise than it is to be a fool. In his own words: “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.” Wisdom is good, and we should all strive to obtain it. That

is what the book of Proverbs is all about. Get wisdom, no matter what it costs you.

However, in this passage the Preacher has come to realize that wisdom, as good as it is, is not able to satisfy us in the search for meaning. And the reason why it is unable to do so is because of the reality of death. Death is the great leveler. Both the wise man and the fool will meet the same end. Both will eventually die.

We are blessed to live at a time when modern medicine has enabled us to overcome many of the ways in which death can cut our days short. Death does not hang over us like a specter in the way that it did in times past. But there is still no getting around the fact that death awaits us all. And when we face up to this, we become more aware of the vanity of life. We cannot find ultimate satisfaction in this life for the simple reason that there is nothing in this life that is permanent. Death reminds us that there is nothing in this life that can provide us with lasting satisfaction. Samuel Rutherford speaks of this in one of his letters, and even though written to an elderly parishioner, Rutherford's words are applicable to every one of us. He says:

“Now, when you are drinking the grounds of your cup, and ye are upon the utmost end of the last link of time, and old age, like death's long shadow, is casting a covering upon your days, it is no time to court this vain life, and to set love and heart upon it...[S]eek rest and ease for you soul in God through Christ.” [*Letters*, 171-2]

This is the Preacher's perspective when he says that he hated life. He does not mean that he hated life in an absolute sense, as we can see by what he says about life at the end of the chapter. He hated the disappointing nature of life under the sun. He came to the realization that there is nothing here that is able to satisfy the longing of his soul.

This brings us to the Preacher's third experiment in his search for meaning: his experiment with toil, or work. He has already described his many accomplishments in life. We can see that he was a successful man, a man who had accomplished a great deal over the course of his lifetime. But when he pauses to consider everything he had done, he is once again frustrated in his search for meaning and satisfaction. He sees that no matter how much a man accomplishes in life, there is no guarantee that those who come after him will be good stewards of what he has left behind. A man might amass a fortune, but he might end up leaving it to a slacker, or to a fool. And this is precisely what happened in Solomon's case. He ruled over Israel during its golden age. But his successor, his son Rehoboam, foolishly rejected wise counsel, with the result that the kingdom was torn in two. This illustrates the Preacher's point: no matter what we accomplish in this life, there is no guarantee of how long it will last. And for this reason, work is unable to produce ultimate satisfaction. On the contrary, work is a vexation.

After telling us about these three failed experiments in his search for meaning, the Preacher comes to a surprising conclusion. He says, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." It is important that we not misunderstand what he means here. This is not the same thing as the fatalistic

statement made by Paul when he offered this hypothetical counsel if there is no resurrection of the dead: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” [1 Cor. 15:32] The Preacher is not resigning himself to meaninglessness here. Instead, he is telling us that there is pleasure to be had, and joy to be found, in this life under the sun. He is saying that it is right and good for us to be thankful for the good things that we enjoy in this life. We should not brood over life’s disappointments. We should be content with what the Lord has given us. We should enjoy life. As much as there is to admire in the Puritans when they are properly understood, we should not approach life with the kind of attitude that H.L. Mencken had in mind when he famously defined puritanism as the fear that somewhere, somehow, someone may be having a good time. The Preacher’s words in this passage clearly refute such an outlook, showing us that God wants us to enjoy the life that he gives us in this world, to enjoy it as a gift from God.

But this needs to be tempered by the things that the Preacher has said in the preceding paragraphs. There is good to be found in pleasure, in wisdom, and in work, but it is not an ultimate good. There is joy to be found in these things, but it is not a permanent joy. As Charles Bridges writes,

“God would have us rejoice in our labour - enjoy our earthly blessings, but not rest in them...Let nothing of earth be our rest - God never intended so poor a portion for his redeemed ones.” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 36]

And in the words of Robert Murray M'Cheyne,

“It is quite right for a believer to use the things of this world, and to rejoice in them...Still, he should ‘rejoice as though he rejoiced not, and use this world as not abusing it;’ for ‘the time is short’...Brethren, if you are ever so much taken up with any enjoyment that it takes away your love for prayer or for your Bible, or that it would frighten you to hear the cry: ‘The Bridegroom cometh;’ and you would say: Is he come already? then you are abusing this world. Oh! sit loose to this world’s joy: ‘The time is short.’” [*Sermons*, 54-5]

The point is this: use the things of this world; enjoy them; enjoy life. But do not try to get more out of it than it can give.

In this chapter, the Preacher sets forth his life as an example of a highly productive and wise life. He is saying, ‘Take this example of the best and brightest and most privileged life you could imagine.’ And after showing us this example, he tells us that, in the end, even the most successful life comes to the same end as every other life lived under the sun. Yes, there are good things in this life, and we should enjoy them. But we need to realize that none of these things will last. And so the Preacher helps us to see two important things about what we might call “the good life.” First, we should find joy and contentment in the life that God grants us in this world. We should receive life as a gift

from God. But second, we should look to God alone for ultimate joy and ultimate contentment.

Both of these truths are expressed in an essay by J. Gresham Machen entitled “Skyscrapers and Cathedrals.” In that essay, Machen writes that, on the one hand,

“This is God’s world, and neither its good things nor its wonders should be despised by those upon whom they have been bestowed.”

In other words, eat and drink and find enjoyment in the work that has been given to you. But that is not all that Machen has to say. For he concludes the essay with these words:

“There will come a time when men will wonder at their obsession with these material things, when they will see that their inventions are in themselves as valueless as the ugly bits of metal type in a printer’s composing room, and that their true value will be found only when they become the means of expressing some glorious poem. Even today, amid all the noise and power of machinery, there are hearts hungry for bread that is bread indeed, hearts thirsting for living water. The things in which the world is now interested are the things that are seen; but the things that are seen are temporal, and the things that are not seen are eternal.” [Stephen Nichols, ed., *J. Gresham Machen’s The Gospel and the Modern World, and Other Short Writings*, 45-6]

You will notice that Machen draws some of his imagery from the well known passage in John 4 where Jesus talks to the woman at the well about living water. Jesus said to her:

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” [Jn. 4:13-14]

Jesus’ words in that passage can help us to understand what the Preacher is talking about in this passage. He is telling us to go ahead and drink the water that this world has to offer. Find refreshment and satisfaction in the good things of this life. Receive life as a gift from God. But do not expect anything in this life to provide you with any lasting satisfaction. Only Christ can do that. He is the only source of living water.