

## **A Glimpse of the Blessing**

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

So much of this book of Ecclesiastes might be well summarized by my sermon title from last week, “The Journey of Futility.” So much of what we are familiar with in this book relates to that sense of the futility of life. Even as we began two weeks ago, “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Last week we looked more closely at the vanity of seeking after great wisdom, and the vanity of pursuing the satisfaction of our physical needs and desires.

That theme continues in our text this afternoon, but here, very near to the beginning of the book, we get a glimpse of the answer to that painful dilemma of life. Actually, it is a very clear and significant glimpse. We gain a marvelous view of what it is, and how it can be, that we can actually enjoy life and receive the blessings of a meaningful existence in this life.

But first, in order to make that glimpse stand out more clearly, we come to,

### **I. A GRIEVOUS CONCLUSION.**

Solomon doesn’t mince words.

v.17 “Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind.”

We know how he got there.

Eccl. 1:13 “I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven.”

Eccl. 2:1 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also was vanity.”

And as we saw last week, it didn’t work. Do you want to be wise and acquire knowledge? Well, you will die just like the fool. Do you want to enjoy the pleasures of this life? Are you depending upon the joy of physical gratification for your happiness? Or the pride of worldly accomplishment. The satisfaction of material possessions. His conclusion is clearly stated,

v.11 “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.”

No satisfaction. No happiness. No security. “Therefore I hated life.” Now, what does that mean? And how does it apply to us?

#### **A. Hating life itself.**

One commentator suggests the translation of being disgusted with life itself. Such a deep frustration, such a full and complete aversion to all that life has to offer, because of the futility and meaninglessness of trying to find happiness. In the deepest of frustrations, Solomon gives in. I’ve had enough. He is simply outraged at the inability to change his circumstances for the better, offended within his own heart and mind that he cannot do anything about the overwhelmingly inevitable and unchangeable condition of his life.

He despairs. He loses hope, tormented by the necessity of having to endure such a meaningless existence.

Paul speaks of this difficulty in his letter to the Romans, describing our lives under the rubric of groaning. Yet Paul never loses hope. Notice, however, the statement of his problem is so very similar to Solomon’s experience.

Rom. 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; 21 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. 23 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves.”

Paul’s groaning, though, is not the groan of futility but of anticipation, as he continues,

Rom. 8:23 “...eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. 24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.”

That passage reaches a glorious climax, with the confidence and certainty that is nowhere to be found in Solomon’s grievous conclusion.

Rom. 8:28 “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

So there is the contrast. “I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me.” Or, to the contrary, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

The first response, that of Solomon, remains in the context of life “under the sun.” Life without reference to God. Life considered entirely in the natural realm, life on earth without God. It is distressing to me, says Solomon. Literally, it is wicked. It is evil, affliction, trouble. And the main reason for that distress, common now even as it was in Solomon’s day, the grievous burden of,

## **B. Despairing of your life’s work.**

v.20

“I turned aside my heart to despair.” It was hopeless, without any possibility of encouragement. Surely, that hopelessness is the most painful of all human experiences. And Solomon gives the reason why he feels it,

v.18-19

I worked hard, he says. But what will come of my work? What will happen to my accomplishments? I will pass away and die, but what of those things I have completed in life? What will come of those things which I have attained?

Why, we leave them all to those who follow after us. And those who follow after us may be wise or they may be fools! They may build upon our accomplishments, or they may make them all of nothing.

The reality is obvious, that you can’t take your accomplishments with you. Instead, you leave them all behind. And what becomes of them? No one knows. There are no guarantees. And you can have no confidence at all. Your life’s work might well all go down the drain. So,

v.18 Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.”

It is useful for us all to consider the future, because if life is merely “under the sun,” if life actually has no reference to God, then it is, indeed, understandable to despair. We live with the sense of a desire for significance. Of importance, lasting importance. And the despair comes with the realization that all that we have will be lost in the future. Under the sun. All that is done under the sun will be lost. All your accomplishments of life will essentially die with you. Obviously, there are occasional exceptions to that principle, but they are exceptions. Ordinarily, you work all your lives and then you die. And then the matters and issues of your life are simply passed on to the next generation.

Some people, many people, seek to deny that reality in the futile attempt to address their sense of hopelessness. And so, you must have,

## **II. A REALIZATION OF YOUR FUTURE.**

Your legacy.

Do you ever think about your legacy? It is, actually, a useful and edifying thing to do, because it is reality. Too often we get so focused upon our own lives and our own existence, that you lose the perspective of the big picture. What about life a generation from now? Or two or three? What will you be able to contribute? What will you do that will actually have some significance beyond your merely day to day existence? What is it about your life that is actually bigger than you?

Again, the despair comes from,

### **A. The uncertainty of your legacy.**

The inability to answer those questions. And the inability to have any confidence that those who come after you will actually

build upon the labor you have done. So the frustration expressed by,

v.21

Thus, v.22

Thus, in the words of one commentator, “If one sees one’s work disintegrate under the hand of incompetent persons who follow one, surely that is ground enough for a remark such as, “What’s the use?”

What’s the use of working hard? What’s the use of doing well or accomplishing good, if you can have no confidence that it will have any lasting good?

And so, to sum it all up,

v.23

That would then describe,

### **B. The utter painfulness of your life.**

“All his days are sorrowful...His work burdensome.” You could translate those two adjectives as painful and grievous. The sorrow of life is the pain of sadness. The anguish of affliction. The grief of distress. And the burdensome nature of our work is the oppression of affliction. The humility of poverty. The weakness of distress.

All of this so depressing. Such exasperating futility, that you can’t even sleep well at night. And you all know some of that experience, “even in the night his heart takes no rest.”

Again, Leupold, “The disappointment gnaws at one’s heart, and day and night the vexatious thought is present.” You lie awake at night, brooding over the frustrations of your life.

Charles Bridges puts it, “[Solomon] heaps up his words one upon another to describe more emphatically the painfulness of his exercise.”

So there you have it, again. “This also is vanity.”

But then, today, in the text itself, we find a glimpse of the blessing. All that we have looked at so far is intended to point out this glorious contrast, this glorious blessing of actually escaping the futility and sense of the utter emptiness of life. And today, unlike the first two sermons on Ecclesiastes, I don’t need to go beyond the text to other places in Scripture for the answer. It is right here, right before our eyes, in Solomon’s own words. Even as he writes this book, he has already come to know the answer. As he cries out, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” he knows where the meaning of life is to be found. He knows the substance of true wisdom that bring an end to that futility of vanity. And surely, in this context of such deep and oppressive frustration, it is,

### **III. A GLORIOUS BLESSING.**

v.24-26

Let me explain carefully what I think these words mean, because it isn’t what is apparent on the surface of our English translation. In the big picture, Solomon is here, for the first time in this book, reaching beyond the level of the things “under the sun.” He is, for the first time, looking at the things that are above. He is now making reference to God. It is the same perspective as you will see in the Apostle Paul’s words,

Col. 3:1 “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”

But what Solomon is not saying here is simply, “Enjoy what

you do. Eat, drink and be happy.” That’s the blessing. “Nothing is better for a man” than that. And I say to you, NO! That’s not what he’s saying.

Look at verse 24. Now let me give you a much more literal translation of the Hebrew words. “It is not good,” or “there is nothing good” for a man to eat and to drink.” “And that his soul should see good in all his labor.”

It is not good! There is no good, it cannot be good, and a man will see no good in his labor. It can’t be done. That’s where we’ve been the last two chapters. That’s the misery and vanity of life. I tried, and it can’t be done! There is no good in it. Not in a mere man seeking good in himself from the perspective of his own life under the sun. In other words, I’ll quote Leupold again, “The ability to enable him to have true enjoyment does not lie in man. Verse 24 calls for a simpler translation that that of our version, viz., “It is not a good thing inherent in man that he is able to eat and drink, etc.”

That’s his conclusion thus far. And then the solution makes sense. With man, this happiness is impossible. It cannot be accomplished. Eating and drinking and getting satisfaction from such things does not lie within the power of a man. He cannot bestow it upon himself. That’s why he is so frustrated. That’s what he feels such futility. He can’t do it! He has tried to make himself happy, and he has failed! Man is not the fountain of his own good. “Even the simplest forms of enjoyment cannot be made to yield satisfaction by man himself. Eating and drinking and ‘getting satisfaction’ in such things come from a higher source, namely, ‘from the hand of God.’”

Now look at verse 25. You may have a footnote in your Bibles, and I believe that alternative reading is actually better. I

believe the verse should read, “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” Likewise, the NIV puts it, “...for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” Same with the NASB and the ESV. And this is so important because this is the answer to the dilemma posed throughout the whole book! The point is, “Who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?”

That question is the proper statement of the whole matter that is before us in Ecclesiastes. A man cannot make himself happy in his own life, by any means at all. No, the satisfaction of life, that which renders life meaningful, is God. The meaning of life that brings happiness to a man’s heart and soul is the presence of God. And so,

**A. The blessed and necessary reference point of life is God.**

By contrast, life under the sun is all vanity. That’s the message of the whole book of Ecclesiastes.

Only God can make us realize that food and drink are his divine gifts. Only with gratitude toward God are we able to enjoy and appreciate those gifts. Only when we live in relationship to the truth and reality of the presence of God can we know real satisfaction. All things under the sun will fall short as the foundation upon which we can find that satisfaction.

v.25 “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?”

No one! Absolutely no one. And the invitation of the gospel is given in the context of that painful reality!

Is. 55:1 “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. 2 Why do you

spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance. 3 Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you-- The sure mercies of David.”

Or Jesus’ words,

John 4:13 “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 "but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

Beloved, Satan is forever telling us that happiness is to be found in eating and drinking. He is forever trying to convince us that if only you could a little more of this world’s goods and pleasures, under the sun, you would be happy. A little more money. A little more strength. A little more in terms of worldly goods. A little more physical pleasure. A little more success. A little more prosperity. And you will be happy.

This is how Jeremiah expresses a rebuke to the people of Judah,

Jer. 2:11 “Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. 12 Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. 13 "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns--broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

That’s what we are tempted to do. To build our lives and to seek to sustain our lives on the foundation of a broken cistern. To find happiness and joy in those things that do not satisfy, to buy bread that does not fill us up.

And what is the answer? What is the only satisfying solution to this dilemma? Why it is to,

Is. 55:6 “Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.”

The answer of life, the foundation upon which we can, indeed, enjoy life and the blessings of life come when you drink of that living water, when you drink of that cistern that does not leak. Jesus says of himself,

John 6:35 “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”

The Psalmist Asaph struggles with some of these same questions about the meaningfulness of life.

Ps. 73:1 “Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. 6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment. 7 Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish. 8 They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily. 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them. 11 And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches. 13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all day long I have been plagued, And

chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. 16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me---...”

That’s his way of saying, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” But look at what made the difference for Asaph. Instead of living “under the sun,” he turned his perspective upon God.

Ps. 73:17 “Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end. 18 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.”

He understood. And then he expresses what is perhaps the greatest declaration of this blessing in Scripture, the blessing of knowing the greatest satisfaction of life possible. So he writes,

Ps. 73:23 “Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. 24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. 26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, That I may declare all Your works.”

Let me make that even clearer, that declaration of what is so good and so blessed about this life. Not simply, “It is good for me to draw near to God,” but more explicitly, in the translation of the NASB,

Ps. 73:28 “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Thy works.”

The nearness of God is my good. The presence of God is my good. And that reference point alone can enable me to find good in all my eating and drinking, and in all my work. So this is the meaning of life, going back to the words of the Apostle Paul in,

Col. 3:17 “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

And then, one more thing about this blessing of God upon our lives.

v.26

The point there is that,

### **B. The covenantal blessing of God falls upon the faithful.**

This is not a works salvation or works righteousness. This is not a covenant of works under which we live with some great and oppressive burden of having to earn our standing before God. Rather, this is a true description of our lives as believers, that our ability to lay claim to the God-given enjoyments of this life clearly corresponds to our own level of faithfulness to God.

The one who is good is contrasted to the sinner, or the one living in his sin. And though none of us, even after we are redeemed by Christ, could claim to be good in terms absolute sinless perfection, still the Scripture uses this description for the faithful, the godly. With the promise of a blessing. It is the blessing Solomon had been seeking. It is the blessing of the enjoyment of life. “God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight.”

That blessing is no different from what the Psalmist writes, Ps. 1:1 “Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat

of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.”

Beloved, there are blessings attached to our faithfulness, and ultimately, the blessing is of the joy and the satisfaction of life. That blessing comes to those who walk with God faithfully.

But, Solomon continues,

v.26 “...but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.”

So what about you? Job satisfaction an issue? Maybe a sense of futility or feeling of hopelessness regarding the circumstances of your life? Maybe some frustration in your own pursuit of happiness? Or a great uncertainty because of the reality of death. The answer is right here. You will not solve any of those dilemmas in any lasting measure without a constant and faithful reference to God. “For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?”

Is that a crutch? Oh, it surely is. You need that crutch, because you can’t do it yourself. Actually, it’s more than a crutch, it’s a wheel chair, because we are not just limping along, we’re paralyzed. We can’t walk at all. In fact, we might as well be those with both legs amputated.

Is the Lord a crutch? Oh, yes. For without him you can do nothing. Without him, you can’t walk a step. Without him, you will never find real satisfaction.

So what is the answer? Where is your peace and happiness to be found, your contentment and your delight within all the circumstances of your life? I'll end by reading,

Ps. 37:3 "Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. 4 Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart. 5 Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring it to pass. 6 He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday. 7 Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. 8 Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret--it only causes harm. 9 For evildoers shall be cut off; But those who wait on the LORD, They shall inherit the earth. 10 For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place, But it shall be no more. 11 But the meek shall inherit the earth, And shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace."