

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 - Meaningless Part 2

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Date: 27 September 2026

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0:00] Father, we do thank you for the chance to pray with one another, and we thank you for those things that Nathan's listed. We pray especially now that as we open your word together that you might help us.

It's kind of rather late on a Sunday evening, and we might be a little bit tired, so we pray just for the strength and energy, but we want more than just that. We want you to be at work in our hearts, so please, Lord, bring yourself glory.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. You are going to need a Bible and a handout, and you may want a pen. So, go for it.

So, whilst those come around, we're in the book of Ecclesiastes, page 670. 670, if you have a church Bible. If you have your own Bible, it is after the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verse 12.

Page 670. 670. Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verse 12.

[1:27] Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verse 12. Okay. Are we all there? Brilliant.

Okay, let me read it for us from verse 12. I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.

What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is crooked cannot be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, look, I've increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.

I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. But I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

[2:31] For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. For the more knowledge, the more grief. I said to myself, come now. I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

But that also proved to be meaningless. Laughter, I said, is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guarding me with wisdom.

I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female servants and had other slaves who were born in my house.

I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I had acquired male and female singers and a harem as well.

[3:29] The delights of a man's heart became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In this, in all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour. And this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless.

A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?

I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads while the fool walks in the darkness. But I came to realise that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself, The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? I said to myself, This too is meaningless, for the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered. [4 : 33] The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die. So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it is meaningless. A chasing after the wind. I hated all the things that I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish.

Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil, 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 labour under the sun.

For a person may labour with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave it all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

What do people get for all the toil and anxious strivings with which they labour under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain. Even at night their minds do not rest.

[5 : 34] This too is meaningless. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.

For without him who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person 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. Great. I hope you all feel better about going to work tomorrow morning as a result of what we have read. Anyway, if you were with us a couple of weeks ago when we started our series in Ecclesiastes, we did a survey through the book of this word meaningless to work out what it meant.

And we discovered that it's not a sort of nihilistic, philosophical, meaningless, you know, there's no point to anything, but rather it's this idea that it is a vapour or mist-like. It is impossible to grab a hold of or tie down.

And in chapter one, which we looked at in a bit more detail, we found that the mistiness of life, the vapourness of life, is seen in the fact that we don't ever make any progress, right?

[6 : 45] So everything cycles around in chapter one. The sea is never full. The rivers keep pouring into it, but they never fill it up. The wind never stops blowing. Generations come, generations go.

The eye has never had enough of seeing. And so in a profound sense, he says, we never achieve anything or make any progress. Everything is the same. Is there anything of which one can say, verse 10 of chapter one, look, this is something new.

It was already here long ago. It was here before our time. The myth of progress is what we consider together. Now, essentially what comes next is really the sort of, I guess, anticipated objection to that, right?

Now, hang on, Mr. Ecclesiastes writer. Have you not thought that there might be some things that kind of step out of that vapour-like existence, that there might be some solid things, like intellect or like fun or like work, right?

Have you not thought, surely there must be something else to this life? Have you never read the Guinness World Book of Records? Do you not realise that there are some really awesome people in the world who can do all kinds of wonderful things?

[7 : 56] And so what the writer of Ecclesiastes does is he turns his attention to some of those things and says, now actually let me tell you that even those things are meaningless. And then he comes at the end to show us how we find meaning and joy in a meaningless world.

So firstly, he starts with wisdom. And this is at the end of chapter 1 that we read from verse 12.

Now, you could perhaps see why this might seem like the answer. You know, surely in this world where everything cycles around, we know what we, there are some experts out there.

There are some people who know what they're doing. Let's listen to them and then everything will be okay. And the writer says, no, actually I've tried that. In verse 13, he gives his mind to study.

He goes down to Waterstones and buys all the self-help books from the shelves and he reads all of them. He subscribes to the podcasts. He listens to Diary of a CEO, even though they go on for like an hour and a half each one.

He finds the time to do it. He listens to the Tim Ferriss show, whatever that is, and Joe Rogan. And he knows all sorts of things, but it doesn't help. In fact, it makes it worse, right? It comes as a heavy

burden.

[8:58] It doesn't fix the problems in life. And he finds that the more he learns, the more miserable he is. Verse 18, for with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief.

I don't know whether you have experienced that, but the more that you understand, the more it frustrates you that things don't work as they could or should. I could give you a concrete example, but it might make you cynical about church life.

But the more you study theology, the more frustrating church can become as well, because you realize that we do it really badly. I do it really badly. And the writer has discovered that about life. The more he understands, the more frustrating it is that it doesn't actually kind of work in the way that it is supposed to. There's no cheat code to life. There's no secret hack. And so much so that even the wise aren't always happy, and they don't always know what they're doing.

You might be both admired as intelligent and also miserable. You might be really capable and yet really stupid at the same time. You can be wise and things not work out in your life.

[10:07] You can know a lot and still not be able to relate to people. You can keep yourself from some things and not from other things. Intelligence and wisdom are not the solid things in a misty life.

So he turns his attention to laughter. Chapter 2, verse 1, I said to myself, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be meaningless. Laughter, I said, is madness.

And what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly. My mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

So, okay, he's unsubscribed now to the diary of his CEO, and he has instead bought tickets for Michael McIntyre at the Apollo. And he's going, right, okay, I'm just going to laugh my way through this now. Surely the best thing to do is to distract myself with pleasure and humor.

Maybe he buys a funny novel or he goes to a good party with fine wine. He doesn't kind of unpick it in the same way as he does with wisdom, but it is clear that it doesn't answer the problem.

[11:10] Maybe he's discovered that some of the funniest men and women turn out to be as broken and dysfunctional, or sometimes even more broken and more dysfunctional than the rest of us. Whatever it is, he quickly moves on in verse 4, and he tries grand designs, right?

Verse 4 of chapter 2, I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female servants. I had other slaves who were born in my house. I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. Here the writer, he does his best to create paradise, and I want to suggest he did a better job of it than any of us in this room have done of it, right? He is able to build the best home, the finest garden.

[12:10] He is right on the top of Right Moves' top-rated houses, and he builds reservoirs to do his watering for him in the garden, right? I get a sense of achievement if you use a host pipe, but he has built a whole reservoir to service his garden, and he gets rich, richer than anyone has ever been before him.

He builds a household. He buys slaves. He owns herds and flocks and the treasure of kings. He has his own singers. I guess, you know, before the days of iTunes, you have to actually have the singers in your house, and so he got them there.

He had live music every night, and he had a harem, sex on sex, denying himself nothing that money could buy, denying himself no pleasure.

And then this, too, turned out not to be the answer. Verse 10, I denied myself nothing that my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done, what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. I think we find this hard

to believe, don't we?

[13:16] Maybe, you know, for those of us, which I think it's probably all of us, we all feel like we've not quite made it here, and so we think it might, meaningful living might be here, if only we could get it there.

You know, if only I had my own reservoir or park or garden. None of us, I hope, want to have a harem, but you get the idea, don't you, that we sort of think, if only we could build heaven on earth, we would find meaning and satisfaction in that.

And so much of the advertising that is pushed towards us tells us just a little more of these things, and we'll find a way out of the vapor-like meaninglessness of life, a better home, a better set of clothes, a better tech, better relationships, more power, more influence.

But even just as we think about it, there's a madness to it, isn't there? Because, you know, we all now have a better phone than we had 10 years ago, right? And yet we still think that maybe the next upgrade might bring us greater, you know, joy than the one that we have at the moment.

But it turns out that we're no happier than we were 10 years ago when we had a terrible phone. David Gibson, in his book, *Living Life Backwards*, says that we assume that deep joy and satisfaction is on the key ring of a new house, even though it wasn't on the key ring of the last house that we lived in.

[14:28] We assume that it's in the passenger seat of our new car, even though it wasn't on the passenger seat of the last one that we owned. And so we strive and strain, and we never seem to learn, and it's hopeless. David Gibson also quotes Blaise Pascal, who famously taught that the pursuit of happiness is the explanation of all that we do.

All men and women, said Pascal, without exception, seek happiness. All their energies are employed to this end. So it's why we stay that bit later in bed. It's why we stop at M&S; and buy a packet of cookies on way to Catalyst on a Monday morning.

It's why our actions, they might be different to one another, aren't they? But it's because we presume that joy is in slightly different places. You know, I might try and climb a hill I've not climbed before.

You might want to spend a day in bed reading a book. Crazy. But that's because that's where we think happiness is. And ultimately, the writer of Ecclesiastes, after extensive research, tells you that despite what we're told, what we're inclined to think, happiness is not found in building heaven on earth, or laughing, or wisdom.

Those things on their own, consider on their own terms, offer you nothing solid, no basis for joy. They are meaningless. They are like vapor. Now, before we notice why, just see that the last one is hard work.

[15:46] He's talked about work already, but he comes on to mention it again in chapter 2, verse 17. So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

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 that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over the fruit of my toil 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.

This is why retirement is so difficult. Don't tell Jen. But this is why retirement is so difficult is because what you do is you hand over something that you have toiled and worked for to someone who might not do as good a job as you have done of it.

And then you watch it unravel. So the writer has worked hard. You know, the previous section told you of all the hard work he had done. And you can put up with hard work if you feel like you're getting somewhere, can't you?

Right? If you feel like you're making progress, then you might think that hard work is worth it. But as soon as you realize that you're not getting anywhere, all of a sudden it becomes pointless.

[16:57] When I was a university student, one of my summer jobs, I worked in a dog food reprocessing plant, which I can tell you is a horrible place to work.

But basically what we were doing is we were in the packing part of the factory. And when the Fortliff trucks came in to lift a load of cans of dog food or cat food, they would often miss it and puncture the bottom row.

Right? So what you had to do is you had to unstack all those cans, restack them onto another pallet, take the bust ones, and throw them in the bin. So me, being a young, enthusiastic 19-year-old student, thought, well, okay, I think I could probably do this quite quickly. But so I unstacked tons of rabbit-flavored whiskers, but it just kept coming and coming and coming. So you go, oh, you've done that already. Oh, I keep bringing more. And more and more and more and more and more until I got told off by the other workers that were saying, listen, if you keep doing this, they will just expect all of us to do it like this and work this hard.

[17:57] Please slow down, because otherwise we'll all be expected to move tons and tons of rabbit-flavored whiskers every day. Because there is no end to bust cans of rabbit-flavored whiskers, right?

It's not a job you ever finish, because they keep busting them. And this is what he's found, isn't it? There's no end to toil. There's no end to it. You're not actually achieving anything at the end of the day. And even if you feel you are, you hand it over to someone who ruins it anyway.

So there is grief and pain, and the stress, notice verse 23, the stress just keeps you up at night. What is the point? It's a meaningless chasing after the wind.

Really, though, in the middle of all of this, I think is the explanation as to why all of those things are meaningless. And we've sort of skipped over verses 12 to 16, but they expand on something that's coming up all the way through.

There's an unhappy reality that dominates the whole section. Let me read to you. I think I've put them on your handout with bold types. It'll be obvious to you anyway. But right, okay, 3B. Chapter 2, verse 3B. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

[19:06] Okay? Verse 14, Verse 16, Verse 21 is saying that they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it.

This is the bubble burster for all of these solid things that we think we're building in this meaningless world. Death. This great reality that faces us all. So life cannot be about the accumulation of achievements or knowledge or wealth, because the wise and the fool die the same way.

And then what we've built is left to someone who squanders or ruins it. And so the pursuit of pleasure in those things is really meaningless. There's a quote by Peter Kraft, which is in the Dave Gibson book as well, and he says this, If you are typically modern, which I suppose is most of us, your life is like a mansion with a terrifying hole right in the middle of the living room floor.

So you paper over the hole with a very busy wallpaper pattern to distract yourself. That is death. And it happens that actually we're pretty good at distraction, aren't we?

So that many people live their lives as if they're blissfully unaware of this great reality that they too will die. So, before we come and think about the answer to all this, I want you, with the person next to you, just to think about, in what ways do we see this pursuit of happiness playing out around us?

[20:47] How does our city handle the reality of death? In your own cultural background, what is sold to you as being the answer to the meaninglessness of life? Is it hard work, study, materialism, family?

Maybe something else. Just talk to the person or persons next to you for a couple of minutes, and then we'll get back together for the rest of it. Go for it. Okay.

Anyone want to throw out anything particularly helpful or insightful said in their group? How do you think we, as a city or as a culture, how do we handle the meaninglessness of all of these things or the vapor-likeness of them all?

Same. Zing. Right.

Okay. Yeah. So kind of don't worry too much about what's going on out there. Kind of work hard and look after yourself kind of thing.

[22:05] Yeah. Yeah. Look after your family. Yeah. I, I, the sentiment interest in that, isn't it? If you see, and we all feel this, don't you? You look at the news and it's so uncontrollable out there that we narrow our focus in and think, well, maybe I can, maybe I can deal with this bit and I will, I will control this bit and make progress in, in this bit.

Yeah. Anybody in? Right.

Right. Yeah. Yes.

Yeah. Legacy, family wealth. These guys are here talking about architects building buildings that they think will leave a legacy for them, thinking that's going to bring them meaning, but then the next

[illegible]

This is you, this is where you are, this is the family you've been born into, this is the tribe you've been born into, this is the job that you've got, do it, and that's it, yeah. I mean, and that doesn't sound great, it sounds kind of a bit like the meaninglessness of Ecclesiastes.

Chapter 2, happiness is a gift from God. Let's read verse 24.

For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person 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.

And that sounds, doesn't it, like eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But it's not, because notice what he's saying. We should eat and drink and find satisfaction in our work because, here's the key, God gives us those things.

I think that's what we were saying at the back. This is all there is, so you might as well just do it, and you might as well just enjoy it for as much as you can because death comes, well, you know, there you go, and it's all gone. You know, but that kind of view of life leaves us emptied and dissatisfied and stressed and often overworked.

This is what there is in this life. This is what God has given. And this is the key to this. I think.

Let me try and give you an illustration which worked in my head, but I'm not sure it would work out loud, so let's have a go. Imagine that you have a five-year-old nephew and it's his birthday.

But anyway, it's not intended to. So you buy him a giant Costco chocolate cake for this five-year-old nephew's birthday. And you know, he loves chocolate.

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So what do you actually do when you give the cake to him? You don't give him the whole cake, do you? You give him a slice of the cake and you tell him actually what you're to do is just slice this up and share it amongst your friends and then you will enjoy it.

And you say that not in order to spoil his fun, but because the only true way to find joy in eating a giant chocolate cake is not to become obsessed with it, but to eat your part of it.

So even if that five-year-old boy cries when you refuse to let him eat all the cake, you still refuse to let him eat all the cake because otherwise you would spoil the child.

So that's it here, right? The joy of food, of wisdom, of homes, of work, and even sex is not in the gift itself, but it is in knowing who it is from and what it is for.

[28 : 25] And God knows, and this really, I think, is why this chapter is obsessed with death. God knows that it is pondering on the reality of our death which will teach us that this is a gift to enjoy for a time and not the substance itself.

Does that make sense? So it is, if I live my life as if I am not going to die, I will find no pleasure in those things because I will be forgetting that they are gifts from God for this time.

They are what God has given us to enjoy. And so remembering death, ironically, enables me to enjoy these things because it teaches me that they are gifts and not the ultimate thing.

So if I forget death, if my life is about trying to forget death and distract myself from it, if I try hard to achieve as much as I can to kind of fill that void, I cannot actually enjoy life or the gifts of this life because I'm the fool of his chapter who just uses them for a purpose for which they're not given and I end up losing them.

I'm like a toddler with a chocolate cake. But if I know that I will die and that the means of, that means that the pleasures of this world are temporary gifts to be enjoyed in relationship with the giver, then I find rest and satisfaction and the happiness that we're all seeking.

[29 : 47] A couple of weeks ago, I suggested to you that the most miserable person on holiday is the one who's always going on about how soon they have to go home. I wanted to suggest to you that's not quite right now from this chapter. The most miserable and pitiable person in chapter two on a holiday is the person who is pretending that they are never going to go home.

Right? And that the holiday is all that there is. And that they're going to stay forever. Because for them, it will be ripped away from them. And the most joyful person on holiday is the person who knows and remembers that it's coming to an end and takes each day as a gift to be enjoyed as a temporary reprieve before heading home.

And so for us, the best and really the only way to truly enjoy life is to see it as a gift and to be the person who pleases God in verse 26 and receives happiness from him as a gift.

Now, you and I have the huge advantage of reading this, don't we, in the light of the Lord Jesus. And that gives us an added color to what it means to please God and what his good gifts are. We know that his great gift to us is salvation in the Lord Jesus.

We know that to please him means coming to him in the name of Jesus. But still, as New Testament Christians, we are to learn that remembering death, while it kills the joy of the secularist, for us, it's the key to joy.

[31 : 06] Because we go, I'm here for a time. God has placed me here for a time. And he's given me these friends. He's given me this church. He's given me this job. He's given me this place to live. He's given me these financial means.

He's given me these particular gifts. And I'm going to enjoy those. The time that I've been given them in the place that God has put me. And I will give praise and glory to him, knowing that one day he will take those things back from me and I'll be with him.

That is Ecclesiastes 2. Any questions or comments in the final moments before we... Tim? I guess I'll speak how...

I speak of evangelism and... So... Okay.

Just like... I was just thinking about... I was thinking about... I was thinking about... Yes.

[32 : 25] Yes. So how does it relate to the work of the Lord and to the end of 1 Corinthians 15, your labour in the Lord is not in vain? I think we need to be careful, don't we, not to say that Christian ministry or evangelism is somehow not subject to the futility of Ecclesiastes, right?

Because, for example, you could walk down the street and bump into someone and do a brilliant job of explaining the gospel and the next Christian that they meet could undo all the really good work that you did in that conversation.

Even in that, you have to believe that actually the way to enjoy doing that is to enjoy it as a gift from God for the time that you have it. God is building his church and his kingdom.

He will do his work. He will use you in it for his glory. And there is great joy in that, isn't there?

There's great Ecclesiastes joy in doing that.

But you and I are not building a church or a kingdom. You and I aren't growing Christians. God is doing that work. He is choosing to use us in it and actually uses us in our weakness and our fumbblings and our stumblings, doesn't he?

[33:40] And so it is amazing how God does stuff which outstrips our gifts. And you've got to hold that, haven't you? Because some of the most gifted people have sometimes been the most fruitless people.

You know, so they've gone to places where it's really difficult and really hard and they have poured their lives into preaching the gospel and maybe seen one or two people converted. They've not built anything. And so we have to find our joy in going, these are the gifts God has given me.

I'm going to use them for this. I kind of want to nuance that by saying having a kind of gospel perspective on how we use our gifts is important in that, right?

So there is a gospel pleasure in giving away money for gospel purposes than there isn't in purchasing lots of things, right? But that doesn't mean that you should give away all your money and not purchase anything.

So 1 Timothy 6 says, if you're rich, God's given you money to enjoy. So enjoy it. What's the best way to enjoy it? It's to be generous with it. And so, yeah. Amen. Can you hear a bit about that?

[34:56] Yes. Yes.

Yeah. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes.

And so, and that, the beauty one's interesting, is it because the person who is the most, it's trying to seek meaning and purpose in holding on to something that is impossible to hold on to actually stops you from enjoying it, even when you have it.

Whereas going, I have the, like the Lord has made me able to stand and walk and run and I'm going to enjoy that while I'm able to stand and walk and run. But the Lord might take that away from me and then I will keep trusting him.

[36:09] Yeah. Whereas if, oh, I've got that and I've got to hold on to it because that's how I find joy in life and that's my purpose, all of a sudden I don't enjoy it anymore. Yeah.

Anybody else? I can see there's more questions whirring behind Simeon's eyes. I've got a quick end before he stops processing and asks a question I can't answer.

But great. Let's pray together and then we can talk more if you'd like to. Heavenly Father, tomorrow we will find ourselves in all sorts of different places doing things that you have given us to do and we want to find joy in doing them as if they're gifts from you.

So whatever work it is that we go to tomorrow, whatever situation that we find ourselves in, even when that's difficult, we want to pray, please, Lord, that we would enjoy knowing you in the midst of it and that we'd enjoy what you have given us for the time that you have given it to us.

Lord, help us not to overestimate either our own abilities or our own longevity. Lord, we know that we are creatures, limited creatures, and we know that we're subject to death in this fallen world.

[37:31] And so please, we pray, keep us remembering that so that we might live lives of joy, trusting in Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen.