

Living a Meaningful Life

The Vanity of Toil

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

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Scripture

We continue in our sermon series on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes, also known as “Qoheleth” and “the Preacher,” wanted to know how to live a meaningful life. He tried all kinds of ways to live a meaningful life. Today we shall see how he discovered the vanity of toil.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in Ecclesiastes 2:18-26:

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.

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. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-26)

Introduction

The song known as “Sixteen Tons” was recorded by a num-

ber of different artists. George Davis claims to have written it in the 1930s when he worked in the coal mines of Kentucky. In those days coal miners purchased most of their household goods at the local company store. Miners resented the company store for three reasons: prices were much higher than those charged by independent retail stores, their grocery and supply bills were checked off their earnings even before they received their pay, and trading was compulsory. The result was the miners got deeper and deeper into debt and found that they virtually owed their souls to the mining company because of the company store. And so the chorus of “Sixteen Tons” goes as follows:

I loaded sixteen tons and what do I get
Another day older and deeper in debt.
Saint Peter don't call me 'cause I can't go
I owe my soul to the company store.¹

I think that the Preacher has someone like this coal miner in mind when he wrote Ecclesiastes. He wrote about the vanity of toil.

Review

The Preacher opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11).

His theme is simple: *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”² It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher's theme is that everything in life is meaningless. For twelve and a half chapters he demonstrates his theme.

However, the Preacher eventually gives a corrective at the

¹ See <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/sixteen2.html>.

² James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

very end of his book. He says that everything in life is meaningless *without God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don't live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

The Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless without God.

The Preacher first explored wisdom (1:12-18). He discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from wisdom.

Then, the Preacher explored pleasure and self-indulgence (2:1-11). Here too he discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from self-indulgence.

Then, the Preacher explored wise living (2:12-17). Again, he discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from living wisely.

In his continuing quest to find how to live a meaningful life, the Preacher turned his attention next to toil.

Lesson

In today's lesson we learn that apart from God, we will not gain anything from toil.

I. The Question (2:22)

First, let's look at the question.

The question is found in Ecclesiastes 2:22, **“What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?”**

The Preacher now examines hard work and **toil** as the possible explanation to the meaning of life. He wonders if the key to living a meaningful life can be found in **toil**. And so he raises the question of hard work, of toiling **with which he toils beneath the**

sun.

It is important to notice that his toil is done **beneath the sun**. That is, his toil is done without reference to God. It is toil that is done from a human or personal or secular perspective. It simply does not take God into account.

The romantic comedy *Just Like Heaven* is about a young, driven doctor named Elizabeth (played by Reese Witherspoon) whose determination to succeed often drives her to work long days. At the end of one such day, she loses control of her car and is struck in a head-on collision with a truck. Elizabeth ends up in hospital in a coma for several months.

A short while after the accident, a young, lonely widower named David (played by Mark Ruffalo) moves into Elizabeth's old apartment. When he does, he finds Elizabeth's confused, misplaced spirit still inhabiting the rooms. Only he can see and hear her. In time, he even falls in love with her.

Late in the movie, David and Elizabeth are sitting in the bay window of their apartment, looking at a photograph of Elizabeth celebrating with her sister.

"You look happy," David says.

"I was happy. But what was I doing with the rest of my time?" she asks. "When I think about my life and I . . . all I can remember is working. You know? Working and working and trying so hard. And for what?"

Trying to comfort her, David reminds her that she is a doctor: "You help people. You save lives."

"Yeah, including my own," she says. "I saved my life—for later. I just . . . I never thought there wouldn't be a later."³

Far too many people get into a routine of getting up, getting dressed, going to work, and then coming home, getting undressed, going to sleep, only to begin the whole cycle a few hours later. Rarely does anyone stop and take the time to ask the question like the Preacher did in Ecclesiastes 2:22, "**What has a man from all**

³ *Just Like Heaven* (DreamWorks, 2005), written by Peter Tolan and Leslie Dixon, directed by Mark Waters.

the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?”

II. The Problem (2:18b-19a; 2:21)

But, the Preacher quickly points out the problem with toil alone giving us the meaning to life.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:18b-19a, “. . . **seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 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.**”

He also said in Ecclesiastes 2:21, “. . . **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.**”

The Preacher acknowledged that all our hard work is left to someone else after we die. Furthermore, that person did not work for it; it is just given to him—like an inheritance. And, the person who receives all that for which we have worked so hard may be wise or foolish, and we have no control over that.

This is not unlike people who win the lottery. A rather large proportion of people who win the lottery end up worse off after a few years. For example, Willie Hurt of Lansing, MI, won \$3.1 million in 1989. Two years later he was broke and charged with murder. His lawyer says Hurt spent his fortune on a divorce and crack cocaine.

Charles Riddle of Belleville, MI, won \$1 million in 1975. Afterward, he got divorced, faced several lawsuits and was indicted for selling cocaine.

Missourian Janite Lee won \$18 million in 1993. Lee was generous to a variety of causes, giving to politics, education and the community. But according to published reports, eight years after winning, Lee had filed for bankruptcy with only \$700 left in two bank accounts and no cash on hand.

One Southeastern family won \$4.2 million in the early '90s.

They bought a huge house and succumbed to repeated family requests for help in paying off debts. The house, cars and relatives ate the whole pot. Eleven years later, the couple is divorcing, the house is sold and they have to split what is left of the lottery proceeds. The wife got a very small house. The husband has moved in with the kids. Even the life insurance they bought ended up getting cashed in.

“It was not the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” says their financial advisor.

These sad-but-true tales are not uncommon, say the experts.

“For many people, sudden money can cause disaster,” says Susan Bradley, a certified financial planner in Palm Beach, FL, and founder of the Sudden Money Institute, a resource center for new money recipients and their advisors.

“In our culture, there is a widely held belief that money solves problems. People think if they had more money, their troubles would be over. When a family receives sudden money, they frequently learn that money can cause as many problems as it solves,” she says.⁴

So, people who work hard and leave their money to someone else face the risk that their hard-earned money will be misused.

III. The Result (2:18a; 2:20)

Third, notice the result.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:18a, **“I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun. . . .”**

And then he said the following in Ecclesiastes 2:20, **“So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun. . . .”**

Notice that there is a regression in the Preacher’s thinking. He not only **hated all his toil**, but eventually he **gave his heart up to despair**. So there is a regression from hate to despair.

⁴ See <http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/SavingandDebt/SaveMoney/8lotteryWinnersWhoLostTheirMillions.aspx?>

Lee Atwater, former Republican Party chairman, said this before he died: “The eighties were about acquiring: wealth, power, and prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth and power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty.”⁵

People work hard all the time. They acquire position, prestige, power, and possessions. And yet, without an understanding of how to live a meaningful life, it leads to hatred and eventually even despair.

IV. The Conclusion (2:19b; 2:23c)

Fourth, we see the conclusion.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:19b, “**This also is vanity.**”

And he said the same thing in Ecclesiastes 2:23c, “**This also is vanity.**”

Does toil provide the key to living a meaningful life? The problem with working hard is that the fruit of our toil goes to others who did not work for it. They may be wise or foolish, but that it is beyond the control of the one who works hard. The result of this is hatred that can lead to despair. And the conclusion is that **this also is vanity**. In other words, hard work and toil, apart from God, is meaningless.

V. The Solution (2:24-26)

Finally, we see the solution.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, “**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**

⁵ Frank Pollard, “Do You Like Where You Live?” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 104.

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 the first time in Ecclesiastes that the Preacher acknowledged that meaning in life is found in a right relationship to God. In fact, the Preacher said that it is only because of a right relationship to God that we can truly enjoy eating and drinking and working. Listen again to how he put it in verses 24-25, **“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, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”**

Work is meant to be meaningful. But it can only be truly meaningful when we do it for the glory of God.

There is an interesting scene in *The Passion of the Christ*. It shows Jesus finishing building a table. In it, Jesus is depicted as having a commitment to putting out an excellent product. As a carpenter, he spent many long hours and years doing manual work in a wood shop. His work had to be of the highest quality.

The Christian apologist Justin Martyr made a revealing observation about Jesus’ work. During Martyr’s life in second century Galilee, he saw farmers still using plows made by Jesus.

Theologian Os Guinness writes: “How intriguing to think of Jesus’ plow rather than his Cross—to wonder what it was that made his plows and yokes last and stand out.”

As Christians we sometimes exalt “spiritual” work and downplay simple labor. However, any work, no matter how mundane, that is done for the glory of God is good and it is spiritual work.⁶

That is why the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

It is reflected in the attitude of the person in the well-known

⁶ Mark Earley, “The God of Wooden Plows,” *BreakPoint Commentary* (4-7-04).

story. During the Middle Ages a traveler passes a building site, and asks one of the laborers what he is doing.

The laborer says, "I'm breaking rocks."

Another worker is asked the same question, and he answers, "I'm earning money for my family."

The question is posed to a third worker. With a glint in his eye, he responds, "I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God!"

Conclusion

And so the Preacher's conclusion is that apart from God, we will not gain anything from toil.

But, knowing that God has a purpose for us, we can find meaning in our toil, and indeed in every area of our lives.

Some of us, however, don't think much about God or about his plan and purpose for our lives. We get so wrapped up in our world and our affairs and our activities that we forget about God.

Preaching Professor Haddon Robinson told the story that when he was in seminary, a pastor from a Christian Reformed Church in Chicago came to the campus. One evening he told the students at the seminary the story of a couple in his church, a mother and her son.

The father had died when the boy was young. The mother and son had a unique relationship. This was back before television, and folks would spend evenings listening to the radio or reading to one another. They both enjoyed listening to good music. Theirs was a special relationship.

In his early twenties, the son eventually met a young woman at the church, fell in love with her, and they decided to be married. Back then, during World War II, housing in our large cities was very difficult to get. The mother, knowing they wanted to be married, said, "We have a two-story house. I can make an apartment for myself in the second story. You and your bride can live in the first story. The only thing I ask is that we get a chance to spend some time together because I'm going to miss the reading and the

music.”

Her son said, “Mother, you can be sure of that. It’s too important to me.”

The couple married. For a while, life continued with the son stopping by a couple of times a week to spend some time with his mother. He was busy, and eventually days and actually weeks went by with only a call from downstairs or a brief glimpse. The relationship was not what it had been.

On the mother’s birthday, the son bought his mother a lovely dress, brought it to her, and said, “Happy birthday, Mother.”

She opened the package and looked at the dress. “Oh, Son, thank you. I appreciate so much what you’ve done.”

He said, “Mother, you don’t like it.”

She said, “Oh, yes, I do. It’s my color. Thank you.”

He said, “Mother, I have the sales slip. They tell me I can take it back.”

She said, “No, no, it is a lovely dress.”

He said, “Mother, you don’t fool me. We’ve been together too long. What’s wrong?”

The woman turned and opened her closet. She said, “Son, I have enough dresses there to last me for the rest of my life. I guess all I want to say is that I don’t want your dress. I want you.”

Out of this quaint story of long ago, I hear God saying that to us. With all of our busyness, we better reorient our lives because, ultimately, God doesn’t want your life as much as he wants you.⁷

You and I will never live a meaningful life until we first connect with God. Then we can live with meaning and purpose, knowing that we are to eat and drink and work and do everything to the glory of God. Amen.

⁷ Haddon Robinson, “Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 138.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher teaches us that apart from God, we will not gain anything from toil.

Help us to understand that our lives can be meaningful when we live them in a right relationship to you. Help us to see how busy we are, and how distracted we are, and how disconnected we are from you. Help us to stop in our tracks, and reorient our lives to you.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.