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Getting What You Want, Coming Up Empty

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

Pastor Ryan Harmon

So what do you do when you get what you have always wanted, and then you realize it just doesn't satisfy? Or maybe playing off the decor here on stage, and trust me, I understand the irony of studying Ecclesiastes with confetti, cannons, and balloons behind me. What if you're invited to the party that you've always longed to attend, and you show up, only to find that the wind has blown away the balloons, and you leave that party feeling just as empty as when you arrived? What do you do next? The truth is, this is the plight that all of humanity has to wrestle with. Where do we find meaning?

This is the quest that we find on the pages of Ecclesiastes, as we follow the Preacher searching for meaning, searching for a place where he can find satisfaction. And today, we're going to join him once again. So, I'd invite you to turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 2, as we continue with him on this quest for ultimate meaning.

Last week, as we studied chapter one, we saw that, as the Preacher turned to the search for wisdom, he began to accumulate wisdom. But what he found is that it didn't do the trick. He found wisdom and the accumulation of wisdom to be lacking. In fact, as he gathered wisdom, what he found is that pain and grief came right along with it. So, he ended by saying, "Vanity…smoke…vapor…it doesn't satisfy. So now, as we turn to chapter two, his quest is going to continue. After he tried to accumulate wisdom, the Preacher is now going to turn to some options for satisfaction, for meaning, that are going to sound very familiar to us. Let's hear what he has to say. Ecclesiastes chapter 2, verse 1:

> **I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 2:1-2)

So in his quest, in his search, wisdom didn't work. So where did he turn? He turned where most of humanity has turned throughout human history. He turned to pleasure—feeling good, being happy, pursuing the good life—however that is defined by our culture. In just a moment, he's going to tell us about some of the things that he pursued in his seeking after pleasure.

But, at the beginning, we just want to acknowledge how familiar this sounds. This is a very current pursuit, the pursuit of pleasure. All of us have probably experienced this in one way or another. The call from our culture is to just make sure that we're accumulating things that make us feel good. So, we're finding ways to distract ourselves. Maybe we've gone through a hard day, and so we turn to these brief little moments of pleasure, just watching something that is superficial, just trying to make ourselves feel a little better. Seeking, in pleasure, ultimate satisfaction.

But the Preacher has already announced to us it does not satisfy. He says laughter is madness and pleasure accomplishes nothing. And there is deep insight there that we need to hear. The truth is, if you want to live a miserable life, make it your goal to be happy. Make it your goal to laugh. If you want to ruin any moment, constantly inspect, "Am I happy now? Am I happy now? Am I happy now?" The search for laughter is going to lead you to a life of misery, a life where all the joy out of really a moment that maybe even should be pleasurable, is just taken right away.

A life of pleasure is a pursuit that so many embrace, but, ultimately, seeking after pleasure for pleasure's sake, leads to a dead end. And automatically it often leads to addiction, because pleasure is something that ultimately can never be fully satisfied. And so we try to find ways to supplement our life, find ways to feel good, because feeling good is what we've made life all about. And so the Preacher says it doesn't work. He says, "Behold, it, too, was **futility**."

We're going to continue on. But before we do, let's just be honest for a moment and just own the fact that this is a very real temptation. It certainly is a real temptation for the culture at large. But it is a very real temptation for us to make life all about just finding contentment in comfort and in pleasure. We hear that call constantly. No matter where you look, you're going to hear it. For goodness sake, even if you listen to a laundry detergent commercial, you're going to hear the call to fill your life with pleasure. Maybe if your clothes just smelled like this field of flowers, you could be as happy as the person doing the laundry.

Pleasure. Pleasure is what consumes our culture, and the Preacher, speaking thousands of years ago, says, "It doesn't work." The question for us is, "Will we listen, and will we learn from his experience?" The pursuit of pleasure can take a lot of different forms. And so now, as we continue, the Preacher is going to tell us things that he pursued. Verse 3:

> **I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.**

It's interesting, when we are lacking a deep sense of meaning, what so often happens for us, as human beings, is we turn to our bodies as our primary source of pleasure. We start to use our bodies, given to us by God, in order to further His ends in the world, and we use it for our own satisfaction, seeking just to satisfy it, make it feel good, however we can. And that's precisely what the Preacher is saying he did here. He turned where so many turn even today. He turned to alcohol and to a life of foolishness, a life of folly. After learning that the search for wisdom didn't ultimately satisfy, he essentially says, "I'm going to turn 180 degrees. I'm going to turn the exact opposite direction. Instead of wisdom, I'm going to go to drunkenness and stupidity. Let's see if that works." I can just imagine him leaving the library, leaving the seat next to the philosopher and the book and the search for wisdom, and walking out of the library and seeing the bar. Hearing the party rage on, saying, "Okay, I'll give that a try. Maybe that will ultimately satisfy me. Maybe that will cure this hopeless condition that I find myself in."

Now, it would be logical to ask, because he said something a little strange. All the while, as he was pursuing wine, drink, folly, stupidity, his mind was guiding him with wisdom. And certainly that raises a question. You say, "Well, how is that really possible?" I think the intent of the author

here—of the Preacher—is to say that this was a very intentional experiment that he was undergoing. He was desperate in his search for meaning. And so, no matter what, no matter what he tried, he would always step back, and he would then evaluate. "Did this work? Did this answer the question that set me out on this quest? Where am I to find significance? Where am I to find meaning? Where am I to find ultimate purpose, every step of the way?" He would stop; he would evaluate, and so his mind was constantly assessing, "Does this work?" His answer was, "It doesn't seem like it works a whole lot." But his pursuit of pleasure, of wine and folly, was just the beginning. He continues, and he is going to again pursue some things that are going to sound very familiar to our world. He pursues pleasure in work…in wealth…in productivity…and in being seen and viewed as very successful. Verse 4 says:

> **I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.**
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> **Then I became great and increased more than all who had preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because all of my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after the wind and there was no profit under the sun.** (Vs. 4-11)

Well, there is no question he achieved greatness in the world's eyes. This is a very successful life. Even if we would see someone like this today, I think our world would look at this person and say, "Now, they figured it out. That is a life to be emulated. They are at the peak of the mountain. Houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, ponds—this is opulence; this is extravagance."

Of course, we're troubled, and rightly so, with the inclusion of slaves, but we need to understand 3000 years ago this was a sign of great wealth, of great power. And it also was a sign that a king probably had conquered other peoples, taken those people and brought them into his service. And this ultimately demonstrated that this is someone who is highly successful. He owns everything. He can do whatever he wants. He has people to wait on him whenever he likes. Silver, gold, herds of animals—more than had ever been seen—choirs, choirs of men and women just to serenade him, to kind of be his soundtrack for life, maybe give him walk-up music wherever he entered a room. This is someone that had it all, and not just that. He had accumulated women, women to satisfy every sexual urge that he had.

Well, make no mistake, even though the signs of success today look different, this is still a great temptation. This temptation to accumulate wealth, to make sure that everyone around you knows you are very successful. Productivity, wealth, opulence, extravagance, these are major driving

forces in our world, the world out there, and, yes, even the world in here. Each one of us, in our own way, faces these temptations.

Here on this Father's Day, I thought I'd share a quick story about my father and a great lesson that he taught me during my high school years. We lived in Missouri, and he was a sales manager. As he started talking to his peers at his company, they began to say to him, "Listen, it's very important, as you're selling, that you appear very successful to the people that you're selling to. And the car you're driving, does not project success. So, you need to get a better car. They need to know that you've made it." So, over the course of time, my dad heard that over and over again. And he finally decided he was going to go buy himself a nice car. And so he bought a beautiful little BMW convertible. It was a very nice car; I took it to homecoming. It was wonderful, a great car. There's nothing wrong, in and of itself, with the car. That's not the point. The point was that the driving motivation to get that car was to appear successful. It's important, significant for me, that other people look at me and they think he's made it. So that drove my dad to get that car.

Now, I wanted to be a very helpful son to my dad, and so I didn't want him to get caught up in the entrapments of the world. And so one Thanksgiving, my whole family was visiting us in Missouri, and we were all staying at a hotel downtown. My dad, in a very generous moment, pulled the key out of his pocket, tossed it to me, and said, "Son, why don't you and your cousins take it for a spin?" We were giddy. We were going to open that car up. But, because I wanted to help my dad, as I was backing that car out of the parking garage, I heard that awful sound as the bumper got torn off by a concrete pillar as I was backing up. Just because I wanted to help, right? Rust and moth. I went to my dad, and he was pretty upset. But in time he did tell me, "I bought that car because I wanted people to think something of me. I bought that car because I wanted to appear successful."

The Preacher is telling us about this drive for success. He's searching for meaning. He says that he withheld nothing from himself. And then in a little glimpse of truth, he confesses in verse 10 that all his labor did bring him a little bit of satisfaction. I think that says something very deep about us. Part of what that tells us, is that we were made in God's image. As he built things, as he created, as he participated in this creative productivity, I think we can all agree that is much better than a life of wine and folly. And in many ways, it's kind of modeling. It's kind of image-bearing, because we serve a Father who is the ultimate Creator. God created everything, He brought everything into existence. And then He stepped back from all that He created, and He looked at it and He was very satisfied. He said, "It is good." And then He looked at man and woman, and said, "Very good".

But, unlike God, the Preacher was seeking his ultimate meaning and satisfaction in these things. And so he finished all his labor, and he looked at it and he said what? "Vanity, smoke, vapor, it all just disappears. It's meaningless. It's striving after the wind." He got what he sought, and it did not deliver. So why was that? Why did he find it to be just like chasing after the wind? Why was it a goal that, ultimately, he could never accomplish? He tells us in verse 12:

> **So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.** (Vs. 12-14a)

Okay, so far it sounds like he's kind of coming to his senses. The Preacher is having this moment of clarity. And surely we can say, wisdom is better than folly. Just like light is better than darkness. And he's having a moment of, it seems like, a grounded kind of truth recognition. It sounds good so far. So, the question is, "Why is he so frustrated?" And he continues in verse 14:

> **And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.**

Ultimately, he's saying whether you are wise, or whether you're a fool, the same fate awaits. Both people…both are going to die. So, what is the point? Now those of us in this room who stand on this side of the cross, and have given our life to Christ, we know that a glorious future awaits us. We know that there is a day where we will step into resurrection life, and God will make a new heaven and new earth. We know all that, and we find great hope in that. But we need to recognize that, at the moment of this experiment, at the moment of this writing, the Preacher did not know that. In fact, we know that Israel never really developed a really robust theology of what happens after death. And so from his perspective, he's looking at life, and he's saying, "This is it, and I don't understand what the point is, because both the wise and the fool are going to die." So where is meaning to be found? He continues down that line of thought in verse 15:

> **Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility, and striving after the wind.** (Vs. 15-17)

Needless to say, this is not going to be our VBS message! The Preacher's conclusion: Whether you are wise or whether you are a fool, you are going to be forgotten. And you know what's even more sobering? Sometimes it seems like the fools in the world are the ones who are remembered longer than the good ones. The great tyrants of the world—their impact echoes for centuries. So what exactly is the point? It's all futility. It's all vapor. It's all meaningless. And so the Preacher ends in verse 17, sounding quite desperate, quite depressed, quite defeated. Death is the ultimate and equal equalizer. All of us will experience it. And so he hated life; he hated life! He continues, as if we needed one more thing to maybe consider, he adds one more frustration. Verse 18:

> **Thus I hated all the fruits of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he'll be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.** (Vs. 18-23)

Not only will the wise and the foolish alike both die. Not only that, but the wise, who build something great, will leave all that they built, to who knows, maybe to a fool who will squander all of it. And just in case you thought there was some hope, some meaning to be found in building for yourself a great legacy, all this productivity, all this wealth—these empires that have been built—all of it can be inherited by a fool who could ruin everything. Not even legacy is assured. So, the Preacher is saying that all of this, all of these places that I have tried to place significance, all of these places I have tried to find meaning, they are all bankrupt; they cannot deliver. I am going to die. The fool is going to die, and I might leave everything I built to someone who is going to waste it all. And so he says, "All of it is **painful**. All of it is **grievous**." A person works all day, labors, has sleepless nights, wakes up at 3am just to consider how to build something wise and good. And then it all gets left to someone who just throws it all away. Life is vanity…meaningless…vapor.

Now, we need to keep in mind—and this is really something that needs to guide us this whole summer—is that the point of Ecclesiastes is not in, necessarily, the details. We're not supposed to sit here and say, "Yes, it is all meaningless." We are joining him on a quest. We're joining him on a quest and a search for meaning. And, here we are, early in his search. We're supposed to learn from his gained experience. And ultimately, we, too, are looking for a place where we can ultimately entrust meaning in life, and we want to do that in a place that can deliver.

So far he is saying none of these things can deliver. Wisdom? "Can't do it." Wine? Folly? "Nope, can't do it." Productivity, wealth, the appearance of success? "None of it can provide ultimate meaning; none of it can ultimately satisfy." It is like chasing after the wind. These are unreliable sources of meaning. Don't bet your life on these things.

I said, at the outset, that these temptations, these pursuits, are going to sound very familiar to us. And I am confident that, in this room, all of them are represented in some way. Maybe the way it works itself out is a little different, but I am confident there are a number of people that have concluded, "You know what? I'm young. I just think partying, enjoying life…that is what life is about." And the Preacher is saying it doesn't work. Probably many more of us are more caught up in the temptation or maybe we wrestle with the temptation to try to have a life that appears successful to everyone around us. Maybe it's wealth. Maybe it's building something great, leaving an incredible legacy. A nice home, a great job, the right clothing, maybe it's a pristine truck, the one you've always longed for. It's going to take a number of different forms. But the thing that we just need to be honest with is that the Preacher is telling us that these places are not the place to ultimately seek ultimate, final, grounded meaning. None of them can deliver…none of them can deliver!

When I was graduating college, I was finishing my time at Wheaton, and I was in a bit of an anxious place. I was struggling with depression. And as I was finishing, you know, the currency of the day, for me, when you get done with college, you don't really imagine that you have the capacity to build great wealth. But the thing that was very attractive to people during my day, when I was graduating, was having amazing experiences. That was the currency. Do you have experiences that everyone will look at and say, "Oh, he's so lucky!"? So, as I was finishing my time at school, I was looking at all of these things in my life. I was like, "Why am I so depressed? Why do I just feel so empty?" And I was blaming my college, blaming my friends, blaming the

weather, because Chicago is just gray and cold. And I was thinking, "Where is meaning to be found?" I didn't know it at the time, but experiences were a pretty good pursuit.

So one day, I was walking at a baseball game or something, and I saw a credit card advertisement where you got a free T-shirt if you signed up…and I needed that free T-shirt. So, I got the credit card, and I decided to gather, for myself, experiences. And so on that credit card, I backpacked Europe for a month. I went all over the continent, saw amazing things, and had amazing memories. But there was one moment, one moment when I was in a cafe car. I was going from Milan to Barcelona, right along the southern coast of France, looking out at the Mediterranean. That early in the morning, I was having a pastry and drinking a cup of coffee, looking at the Mediterranean, and the sun was coming up. French fishermen were putting their boats out. That moment was just incredible! And I remember thinking to myself, "This is amazing! And I am miserable. I brought me with me. I'm the problem. And this stuff is nice, but it cannot satisfy me."

What do you do when you get what you've always wanted, only to realize it just doesn't satisfy? The Preacher is on a quest, a quest for meaning. He is going to continue this quest, but so far, the echo over and over again has been *vanity*. It is vanity; it is smoke. It is like a cloud. You look at it. You think it has structure; you think it has form, but it's just vapor. It just slips right out of your fingers. None of it can deliver. The scene is cloudy. It is dark.

But here, as we come to these last three verses, there is a little moment of relief. It's almost as if the sun breaks through the dark clouds for just a moment. And it seems as though he has a little bit of hope that comes essentially out of nowhere, beginning in verse 24:

> **There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after the wind.** (Vs. 24-26)

I told you it was brief. But there is a little moment of sun that breaks through the darkness. It comes in verses 24 and 25 where the Preacher acknowledges that to receive that which is good, not as an end in and of itself, but to receive it as a gift from God, who ultimately is good. Maybe, there, is some satisfaction to be found. Maybe, there, is some ultimate meaning. Not that these things in and of themselves can satisfy but maybe it points to One who can ultimately satisfy. Maybe receiving life as a gift from God, maybe that can ultimately satisfy.

He closes the chapter once again saying it is vanity…and so the quest has not concluded. But there's a little moment that gives us some hope, as we continue on with him in the weeks to come. What happens when you get what you've always wanted, only to realize it doesn't satisfy, what do you do next? Our world is going to shout at us that the thing that you should do next is to continue to accumulate more and more things, more and more stuff, more and more experiences. But as we close this chapter today, and we move on for the week, my prayer, my hope is that when all of us walk away, we say, "Lord, show me places I have been seeking meaning that cannot

ultimately satisfy. And help me, help me to turn to You, the ultimate source of satisfaction." So let's turn to Him. Let's ask that He would do just that as we close our time together.

Our Father, we do recognize that You alone are good. We thank You that through Your Son, we have been restored to relationship with You. Lord, we confess there are so many things that we, in our waywardness, we're so tempted to seek meaning in all these things that cannot ultimately satisfy. So, Lord, I ask that by your Spirit, You would give us discernment, discernment to see ways that we are placing our hope in that which cannot deliver. And in so doing, You would return us to Yourself, the One who ultimately gives us meaning and hope forever and ever. Father, we pray these things in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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