

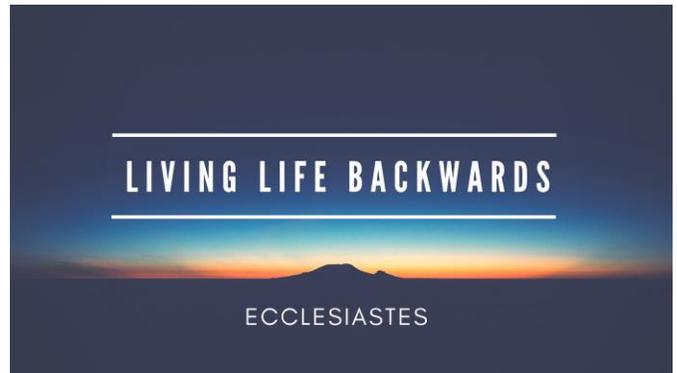
## Is That All There Is?

**Ecclesiastes 1:1-12 – 2:26**

**Living Life Backwards, Part 2**

**David Sunday**

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This is our second week in our summer series where we're looking at this unusual book of Ecclesiastes. When I was thinking about what it's like to read Ecclesiastes, I was reminded of something that happened a couple weeks ago. I sat down at our piano and took out some music pieces I had learned back in junior high and high school. I wanted to see if I could still play them. It took a while for my hands to settle into the keyboard and my fingers to get relaxed. I worked my way through the pieces, although not as well as I played them when I was a teenager, but it was fun to play them again.

Then I got up from the piano and noticed something on my iPhone that needed to be checked. I consider myself to be fairly good at texting; I can sometimes even do it without looking. But after playing the piano, I couldn't text. I couldn't get my fingers to move the right way. It was like something in my brain needed to be switched in order to go from the piano keyboard to the phone keypad.

That's kind of what reading Ecclesiastes is like. It's jarring. It's not what you expect to find in the Bible. But it's there because it's a perspective we need to see.

You might think of it as going to England—as I did once with the girls—and driving there for the first time. I rented a car in the center of London, where the streets were very crowded and very narrow. It was so nerve-wracking to drive on the other side of the road. I couldn't understand MapQuest with that British accent. The roundabouts were very confusing. That's what reading Ecclesiastes is like—it's like learning to drive on the other side of the road.

Last week I encouraged all of you to read through this book and I gave you some keys to gaining wisdom and benefiting from Ecclesiastes. I want to repeat them again this morning, because I really hope throughout the summer we'll all be turning to this book to read it.

1. Read Ecclesiastes with prayer and thanksgiving. Just thank God He's given us a book like this—so honest and raw. It speaks to the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. Ask Him to help you understand it through His Holy Spirit.

2. Remember to keep the whole Bible story in mind. Ecclesiastes is a book within a Book—a Book that starts with Genesis 1 and 2. God created a world that was good; everything in it was good. He created it for His glory and our enjoyment. Then in Genesis 3, we see the beautiful Eden God created had been polluted, ruined by sin. Like a biological virus, everything turned ugly. All the beauty God had made was being corrupted.

But the Bible tells us in Romans 8 that God did this with a reason in mind. He subjected creation to futility in hope that the creation itself would be set free from its bondage to corruption. That with the children of God, creation would obtain freedom and liberty; that all things would be restored. So we have to keep Genesis 3 and Romans 8 in mind, along with Revelation 21 and 22. That's when every tear will be wiped away; when there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. When you see how Ecclesiastes fits into the big story line, it starts to become beautiful and rich.

3. Ask how Ecclesiastes creates longings that only Christ and His gospel can fulfill. What do we see more clearly now, after the coming of Christ, that Solomon could only see in shadows?

4. Remember to look for key words used frequently in Ecclesiastes: vanity, “under the sun” and another one we'll see today: gain.

Before we read our text this morning, I want to mention something about the author of Ecclesiastes. He identifies himself as “the Preacher” in verse one. It's the Hebrew word *qoheleth*, which means “the gatherer” or “the assembler.” He was bringing people together to hear words from God. He called himself “*the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*” Traditionally believers have thought Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. When we read chapters one and two today, it's hard to find anyone in history who resembles these experiences more than King Solomon did in his lifetime.

But in modern times, many people—even some very conservative, solid biblical commentators—have suggested that this book was written during the time of the exile and that it wasn't really Solomon who wrote it, but another person who was putting his sermon into Solomon's mouth as a kind of teaching device. Like I said, a lot of good, godly commentators hold to that view.

I'm still of the mind, though, that Solomon wrote it. So I'm going to talk about it like it's Solomon. I kind of go with what J.I. Packer said: “Ultimately, this question doesn't really need to concern us. The sermon is certainly Solomonic in the sense that it teaches lessons which Solomon

had unique opportunities to learn.” So you’ll hear me say, “Solomon, the Preacher, the convener, the assembler.” Not *qoheleth* very often—that’s a hard word to say. But you’ll hear me referring to this as “the Word of God through Solomon.”

Before we read it, let’s pray and ask God for His help.

God, we do thank You that Your Word is so honest that it speaks to the brutal realities and the emptiness of life in a fallen world. It depresses us in order that we might learn dependence upon You for all our joy and satisfaction, for in Your presence there is fullness of joy and at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore. So Lord, let this word today drive us into Your arms. Let it bend us low to the fountain of living waters which alone can slake our thirst. May we come to You today as a deer panting for the water, our souls longing for You. Help us, Holy Spirit. Help me preach in my need and weakness and help us hear Your Word. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let’s read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18:

*<sup>12</sup> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>14</sup> I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*<sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

*<sup>16</sup> I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” <sup>17</sup> And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.*

*<sup>18</sup> For in much wisdom is much vexation,  
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

This is God’s Word and we thank Him for it.

I wonder if anyone has ever told you that you’re a control freak. Has anyone ever made that known to you? If you’re a parent, you’ve probably heard that from your teenagers. It’s something we all struggle with. We want to control things. Over the past couple weeks I’ve been trying to move my electronic files from Evernote into another cloud-based application. I don’t know a lot about computers and it has been very frustrating.

By the way, I have about 14,000 files in Evernote. That tells you something about my personality. I don’t know what it tells you, but I’ve got a ton of files in Evernote. I want to get them into a different cloud-based application and I’m finding there aren’t many cloud-based applications

that can easily handle 14,000 files. I want it done faster than it's happening—and I keep hitting my head against the wall. I can't control this. It's just not working the way I want it to.

What is it that we're really looking for in life when we're trying to control things? Well, the question of Ecclesiastes is not is there life after death? The question that Ecclesiastes asks is more is there life before death? Is there any point? Is there any meaning, any purpose, any satisfaction in this life? If so, how do we find it? How do we figure it out?

Blaise Pascal said very insightfully, "What we're really looking for is happiness," and by that he didn't just mean giddy, surface-level happiness. He meant deep soul satisfaction. He said:

All people seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war and of others avoiding it is the same desire in both, attended with different views.... This is the motive of every action, of every man, even those who hang themselves.

Ultimately they're thinking, "Suicide is going to make me happier than the way I am now." This is what we're seeking.

Solomon tells us right from the start, "All your controlling efforts to find that deep soul satisfaction and happiness are going to leave you frustrated." He says, "I've tried that. I've searched." He summarizes his search in these first few verses.

Verse 13, "*I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.*" It was a sincere search. He's put his whole heart and soul into knowing the truth. It was comprehensive. He's seeking and searching. He's going after it with his entire heart and not leave any stone unturned. He's looking at all that is done under heaven and he wants to find some definitive results, some conclusions. Why do things happen the way they do? What's the purpose and meaning underneath it all? This is a commendable search. He is searching and seeking by wisdom. He's not just throwing away his intellect—he's cultivating it.

The president of Wheaton College makes this comment: "Solomon was the kind of person who, given the choice, would attend a liberal arts college and major in philosophy." But we ask, "Solomon, can information lead to transformation? Can knowledge bring everlasting life?" He replies, "No, sorry to tell you—it can't."

Look at the rest of verse 13: "*It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.*" He's saying, "The longer I looked for answers, the harder it was to understand the meaning of life. The more I knew, the more frustrated I became with all the things I couldn't figure out." He says in verse 14, "*I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*" There's that key word again: vanity. It means

breath, vapor, fleeting. You can't get your arms around it; you can't hold on to it. It's all vanity and it's all chasing after the wind. That's just a funny picture. If you went out into the parking lot and someone was literally chasing after the wind, trying to catch it, we'd be looking for a special number to call to get help for that person.

This is his conclusion in verse 15: "*What is crooked cannot be made straight.*" This world is broken. Sin has twisted everything. It's going to take an intervention from outside to fix what's broken. Alastair Begg says, "We're trying to line up the squares on a Rubik's cube with a couple of colors missing." We're not ever going to be able to fix what's broken.

Genesis 3 brought a curse upon all our attempts to control life, to get satisfaction, to get happiness—they're all going to leave us frustrated. We can't make straight what is crooked, "*and what is lacking cannot be counted.*" Phil Ryken illustrates it like this: "Life is like an account that refuses to balance. We can tell there's a deficit, but we can't figure out exactly what it is."

I can picture Donna back in the church office. She looks at those books so carefully, but for some reason two dollars are missing. She will search and search and search, trying to figure out how to balance those books. And 99% of the time she gets it. That's amazing. But Solomon is saying, "We can't. What is lacking cannot be counted." When we finally get to the bottom and make an adjustment just to even out the books, deep down inside we know we're fudging the figures. We know something is off.

So Solomon is going to tell us in chapter two about the experiment he went on. He's going to experiment in two ways. Mike Bullmore describes it as "living large and living smart." Solomon wants us to know from the outset all of life was frustrating. "I couldn't get hold of anything. I kept striving after the wind." Look at verse 18: "*For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*" Or as an old German proverb puts it, "Much knowledge gives one a big headache." It just left him vexed and frustrated.

Why is this? What's God aiming to do through all of this? He's aiming "to depress us into dependence on our joyous God" As we saw last week from [The Gospel Transformation Bible](#), that's why Ecclesiastes was written: to depress us into dependence on our joyous God. Why do we need to be depressed into dependence? Because if we aren't, we won't feel our own ignorance. We won't realize our own vanity. We won't admit our own poverty of spirit. We won't acknowledge our weakness. Even more, we won't acknowledge our sin and corruption.

If we don't do that, we'll never recognize God's light, His wisdom, His goodness, His purity, His righteousness. John Calvin said, "We cannot seriously aspire to God before we become displeased with ourselves." You're never going to seek God seriously until you come to the end of

yourself, until you become displeased with all your efforts at controlling life. We don't believe that easily.

That's why Isaiah has to say things like, "*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*" (Isaiah 55:2). That's why God says through the prophet Jeremiah, "*My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water*" (Jeremiah 2:13). That's where our hearts naturally go. Matt Chandler says, "The philosophy we all subscribe to is this: what will ultimately satisfy us is more of what we already have." That's what we naturally think. "Just give me more—then I'll be satisfied."

If you don't believe that, think about a time when you prayed and asked God for something you desperately wanted. Has anyone ever prayed for a wife, a husband, children or just a little bit of a raise in your salary? "God, if I could just have \$30,000 a year, I'd be satisfied." Anyone remember when you thought that way? God gave you the \$30,000, but then, "God, if I could just have \$50,000 a year, I'd be satisfied." What did they ask the rich man? "How much wealth does it take to make a person happy?" Answer: just a little bit more. Just give me more. God answers our prayers, then we have the gifts—but we're still not satisfied. We think to ourselves, "In order to be happy, I need this."

## Living Large

Solomon is telling us, "I've done two very prolonged experiments with life and I've found that all of this results in nothing"—the live large experiment and the live smart experiment. So let's start at Ecclesiastes 2:1, where Solomon says, "I'm going to live large." "*I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.'*" He's got lots of resources at his command and he's going to suck all he can out of life. *Carpe diem*—seize the day. Enjoy it! This is going to be fun!

But then he warns us in verse one that the outcome was not satisfying: "*But behold, this also was vanity.*" What happens when a human being seeks ultimate soul satisfaction where God never designed that it could be found? It's vanity. Emptiness. He had wine and women and lots of projects going on in his life—but it all left him empty.

Verse two: "*I said of laughter, 'It is mad.'*" Is there anything wrong with laughing? No. I love to laugh. But if we're using laughter to anesthetize the pain in our lives or using laughter to avoid facing the deeper, more profound questions and realities of our sin and need for a Savior, then laughter is covering all that up, it's madness. "*And of pleasure, 'What use is it?'*"

Verse three, *“I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine.”* Again, this is another good gift from God. Psalm 106 says wine was given by God to gladden the heart of man. The problem is not in the gift. The problem is the expectations that we bring to that gift. “This is what’s going to satisfy my soul.” No, it won’t. Solomon said, “I experimented with that. My heart was still guiding me with wisdom, then I pursued folly. Maybe I’m just going to let it all rip. I’m going to do whatever I want to do, until I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.” It was not satisfying to him.

All the while he’s having all these pleasures—he’s experiencing all this goodness of wine and happiness and laughter, and he is working hard the whole time. Look at verse four: “I made great works.” All the things he did are amazing. As you listen to this description, think about the Garden of Eden. It’s almost like Solomon was trying to recreate the Garden of Eden here in his own palace, in his own kingdom. It reminds us of what we saw last week—we’re living in a place called “once Eden.” That’s this world—it’s once Eden and we’re longing for it to be restored. Can it become what God created in the beginning?

Solomon says in verse four, *“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.”* That’s Genesis 2 language, reminding us of how God made a beautiful world in Eden for us to live in, with all kinds of trees. Verse six, *“I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.”* So it’s like he’s at the top of his career. He’s built everything, and he’s got a ton of people working for him. Verse seven: *“I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.”*

But it didn’t satisfy. Verse eight: *“I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women.”* He didn’t just go to Spotify and download U2. “Oh U2, come to my house and sing for me.” No. At the end of it all he says, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” He’s dissatisfied. *“And many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.”* Oh, what we expect from sex—and it’s a good gift from God. There’s nothing wrong with sex within marriage. Nothing wrong with music. Nothing wrong with laughter, gardens, parks. Nothing wrong with wealth. Nothing wrong with wine. What’s wrong is these cannot hold the weight that we attach to them. They cannot give our soul satisfaction. He said, “I’m going to live as big as my resources will let me.” And he had a lot.

Verse nine: *“So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.”* He never stopped thinking this whole time. He never just

abandoned his mind. He was experimenting. He was really trying to find that happiness and recorded the results so that we will gain wisdom.

Verse ten: “*And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil.*” There was some pleasure in all this. “*And this was my reward for all my toil.*” There’s a little glimmer of light—a little glimmer of hope there. We’ll come back to that.

Then verse 11, “*I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*” Circle that word “gained.” That’s another one of these key words in Ecclesiastes that’s going to keep popping up. How do we gain things in this life? How do we come out ahead? How do we find that deep soul happiness?

As we listen to Solomon, I think each of us envy him a little bit. We think, “Well, Solomon, I’d like to have the chance to have all the resources you had. I think I could do a better job than you did using them.” We’ve all thought, “If I could only just have a little bigger house with a better view. Oh, that would make me happy.”

For me, it’s Door County, overlooking the peninsula in Green Bay. I don’t need a big house—just a cottage up there on the bluff where I can see for miles. And then, oh yeah, it would be nice if I could have a landscaper do my lawn and plant some flowers. By the way, I don’t like cleaning, so yeah, if I could have some servants come clean the house too. You know, less menial labor for me. I think, “That’s what’s going to satisfy me.”

But what’s the outcome? Verse 11, “*I considered...*” Solomon looked it straight in the eyes and thought long and hard about this. With all his brilliant achievements and with all the things he allowed his heart to taste and desire, in the end, “*all was vanity and a striving after wind.*” It’s like trying to pump air into a flat tire without fixing the leak. It won’t fill the void. The poet Robert Burns said:

But pleasures are like poppies spread  
You seize the flower—its bloom is shed  
Or like the snowfall in the river  
A moment white, then melts forever.

That’s what all the pleasures of this life are like. You can’t find it in wisdom, knowledge, pleasure, work. Madonna said:

Every time I accomplish something, I feel like a special human being.  
But after a little while I feel mediocre and uninteresting again. I find I

have to get myself past this again and again. My drive in life is from the horrible fear of being mediocre. I have to prove I'm somebody.

Oh, that we Christians would be as honest as Madonna is about what's really driving our hearts. Sometimes we add ministry to this list. "I am going to find satisfaction through ministry. I'm going to work hard for the Lord." But if we find our identity in the ministry we do for God, it's going to leave us just as empty and just as dissatisfied—and in fact toxic to those to whom we minister. That's because it's about us.

So that is the result of the "live large" experiment. Solomon is going to come back one more time, in verse 12, and try to "live smart."

## Living Smart

*"So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly."* Mike Bullmore said, "This was not just a weekend gig. He didn't just download a course from iTunes University." He was not just thinking, "Okay, let me try a little bit of study." No, he was turning his heart to consider wisdom. He was giving it all he's had. He was the king. He had all the resources at his disposal. He could get any book he wanted. He could hire any tutor.

He turned to consider wisdom—and what did he discover? Verse 13: *"Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly."* So wisdom does have advantages over foolishness. If you have to choose one or the other, choose wisdom. It's better to think than not to think. It's better to consider the consequences than to not consider consequences. Yes, being wise does help in the short term, *"as there is more gain in light than in darkness."*

Verse 14: *"The wise person has his eyes in his head..."* That's a good thing. You don't want your eyes separated from your head. *"...But the fool walks in darkness."*

So, yes, wisdom has advantages, Solomon is saying. But he continues, *"And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them."* Now, stop here. This is key to understanding Ecclesiastes. This is one of the profound insights of this book. In fact, the reason we titled this series "Living Life Backwards" is because a writer named David Gibson has a book on Ecclesiastes with that title. What it basically says is until we grapple with the reality of death, we're not ready to live. Until we face that square in the eyes—the fact that death stalks all of us, will find us and will thwart every ambition of happiness under the sun, everything we're searching for—if we limit our search to what's under the sun, death will destroy it.

You can become the wisest person in the world, yet, Solomon says, you're going to die. Verse 15, *"Then I said in my heart, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then*

*have I been so very wise?”* If I’m wise, then I have more vexation. If I have knowledge, then I have more headaches. Why didn’t I just be a fool and have more fun?

It’s like one teacher said of a student, “If ignorance is bliss, then this child will be the happiest child ever.” Why didn’t I choose that route? Why did I try so hard to be smart? I’m going to die.

*And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! (2:15b-16).*

A very important theme in this book is the mortality of all humanity—the inevitability of death. It’s going to find us all. Mike Bullmore says, “Whatever you’re looking for for your satisfaction, it had better be able to deal with death.” It had better be able to stand up in the face of the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Solomon is telling us that “living large” and “living smart” cannot stand up to death.

He gets so frustrated with his search that in verse 17 we see he’s becoming very bitter: “*So I hated life.*” I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I’ll bet many of us have had times of bitterness in our lives. We can’t live long in a fallen world, with all its disappointments, without sometimes feeling like we hate life—“*because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*” It reminds me of Marie Antoinette who came to the point in her life, despite having great riches, when she said, “Nothing tastes.” She couldn’t taste anything anymore. There was no savor or flavor.

In his prison of bitterness, it was like a trigger went off in Solomon. He rants and raves about everything going on in his life, starting in verse 18:

*<sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> 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.*

Statistics show that 60% of the people who inherit large amounts of wealth pretty much squander it within one generation. This is reality in this world. You work so hard to have a lasting legacy with your finances, but once you’re gone, you can’t control what they’re going to do with it. And a lot of them are going to waste it. All you’ve worked for will seem like a sand castle on the beach. The wave comes—and down it goes. That’s life in this world.

Solomon thinks about this in verse 20: *“So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair.”* If you’re searching for ultimate satisfaction under the sun in things that were not designed to provide that satisfaction, there can be only two outcomes. Either you’re going to become a cynic about everything or you’re going to despair. Solomon turns to despair for this reason:

*<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?*

What is the gain in all of this? “When we’re working,” Tim Keller says, “it’s like we’re plowing water.” We move it out of the way and it just comes and fills up again. It’s like the guy who spent his whole life making Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. How hard did he work to catalog every word in the Bible? And now, does anyone use a Strong’s Concordance? We just go on our phone and a few seconds we can find what it took him a lifetime to put together.

Vanity. Nothing is ultimately gained. You work night and day. You’re never off. You’re never truly home. You’re checking your phone all the time, wondering what’s next? “Does anyone need a response from me in the middle of the night?” You toss and turn, because you’re anxious about work. You’re living large, you’re living smart—but now you’re living bitterly. You’re frustrated, because you’ve gone after broken cisterns that can hold no water—and you’ve forsaken the fountain of living waters (Jeremiah 2:13).

Every Wednesday Donna texts, asking, “What is your sermon title going to be?” I often don’t know quite yet what I want to call it. This past week I thought about it for a few minutes, then thought of that song by Peggy Lee, “Is That All There Is?” Do you remember how she describes life?

I remember when I was a very little girl, our house caught on fire  
I’ll never forget the look on my father’s face as he gathered me up  
In his arms and raced through the burning building out to the pavement  
I stood there shivering in my pajamas and watched the whole world go up in  
flames  
And when it was all over I said to myself, “Is that all there is to a fire?”

And when I was twelve years old, my father took me to a circus, the greatest  
show on earth  
There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears  
And a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads  
And so I sat there watching the marvelous spectacle  
I had the feeling that something was missing  
I don’t know what, but when it was over

I said to myself, “Is that all there is to a circus?”

Then I fell in love, head over heels in love, with the most wonderful boy in the world

We would take long walks by the river or just sit for hours gazing into each other’s eyes

We were so very much in love

Then one day he went away and I thought I’d die, but I didn’t  
And when I didn’t, I said to myself, “Is that all there is to love?”

Is that all there is, is that all there is

If that’s all there is my friends, then let’s keep dancing

Let’s break out the booze and have a ball

If that’s all there is

[From “Is That All There Is?” by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller]

She concludes, “People will say to me, ‘If that’s what you believe, why don’t you just end it all?’” Her answer is, “Not me. I’m in no hurry for the final disappointment. I don’t want to face my death and find out this was all there was to life.” You hear that and you can just tell there’s something in the human heart that is craving satisfaction. It’s like Augustine said, “Lord, You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” We’ll never find the satisfaction we’re looking for if we leave God out of our lives.

That’s why the last three verses of this chapter are just beautiful. The light shines in with a great brightness. It’s like this past week with so many rainy days. Then how refreshing was it finally to see the sun? There’s sun here in verse 24: *“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”* If you just took those words, you might think he’s advocating the philosophy that says, “Let’s eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” This is all there is—just eat and drink and find enjoyment.

But that’s not what Solomon is saying. We know this because of a name that appears in verse 24 that hasn’t shown up for a long time. Look over Ecclesiastes 1 and 2. Whose name is missing? From every verse except 1:13—where it says God has given an unhappy business to the children of men—there is no mention of God in Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 until you get to verse 24 of chapter two. What name is mentioned almost 40 times? I—me—my. I searched. I did this. I built this. I cheered my heart. I-I-I-I-I. It is complete self-absorption. There is no mention of God.

But in verses 24-26, God shows up in every verse. What Solomon is telling us is that things are different when God is in the picture, when God is in the right place, when we are in a right relationship with God. How does that happen? It doesn’t happen through your works. It doesn’t

happen through your wisdom. It doesn't happen through trying to find a way under the sun to control your relationship with God.

No. You get into a right relationship with God by recognizing, "I am poor. I am weak. I'm infirmed. I am a sinner. But God, You have provided Your Son Jesus. He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). He has become for me wisdom from You. He is my righteousness. He is my sanctification. He is my redemption." When you put your trust in Jesus, you come into a right relationship with God.

The beautiful thing is that when you come into a right relationship with God, it's not just so that you can go to heaven when you die. You come into a right relationship with God, and now for the very first time you are able to enjoy the things of this earth. That's because you're not trying to make these things do what they were never intended to do. You're not looking to food or drink or marriage or wealth or gardens or work to get you the satisfaction that only God can give.

"My work, my wealth, my wisdom, my wife, my wine—it's all a gift from You, God. I'm not meant to look to this for satisfaction apart from You. But when I find my satisfaction by trusting in Jesus, then I can take these gifts from You and say, Thank You, God. I can enjoy them with a glad and merry heart." In a sense, it's only believers who can really have lasting joy and lasting satisfaction in this world. In verse 24, Solomon says, *"...enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God."*

Doug Wilson illustrates it like this. "God has given everyone in the world a can of peaches. But only the believer gets the can opener." Only the believer is able to find enjoyment in these gifts.

Verse 25: *"For apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him..."*—how do we please Him? By trusting in His Son Jesus. To that one, *"...God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy."* We get joy in this vain world! Joy in the midst of all this chasing after the wind. Yes, you can have joy here, because this is the world God has created. Because His Son has come into this broken world to redeem it. He's going to restore it and there's going to be a new creation—so we can have joy in the things of earth that He has given us. *"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."*

So the message of this section of Ecclesiastes is: approach life receptively. I'm not sure who said that, but we should approach life receptively. We can enjoy God's gifts as they unfold in our lives. We can rejoice in the gifts of God if we don't make them our god. The blessings of this life are good gifts for us to enjoy, but they are terrible gods.

I read someone comparing this story of Solomon's life to the parable of prodigal son. He said this:

Solomon's life in so many ways reminds us of the prodigal son. Many people think the prodigal son's sin was partying too much. Then he came to his senses and wanted to leave his partying days behind him. We so often forget the story does not just begin with partying—it ends with partying. Yes, there's a party in the far country that leaves the son broken. But there is also an epic party when he gets back home. Dancing and singing can be heard outside. The difference is the son cannot enjoy the party rightly until he is satisfied in his father's love.

Let's think about that together as we close. I'd like you to offer your heart to the Lord. Lift them up to the Lord and say to Him, "O God, You are my God. I seek You earnestly as in a dry and weary land, where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1). As we lift our hearts to the Lord, let us pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we can only have joy in this life—lasting joy, real soul-satisfying joy that won't fade away—when we're in a right relationship with You as our Father. Thank You that You have made a way. You've sent Your Son from heaven into this broken, twisted, corrupted world. He can make straight what is twisted. He can provide what is lacking.

Jesus, You've come and brought redemption. You brought salvation. I thank You that that doesn't just bring us joy in heaven for eternity, as it will, but there's joy to be found now in knowing You. You came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. So Lord, we turn and repent from putting our trust in created things that You have made. We repent of putting our trust in Your gifts without trusting in You, the Giver. We thank You that You are calling us into a deeper trust, confidence and love for You this morning. We want to follow You there, Lord. We want to know You better this summer. We want to draw near to God and have You drawing near to us, refreshing our souls, reviving our heart and satisfying us. We can then receive all the good things in life as gifts from You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ [www.newcbc.org](http://www.newcbc.org)

*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ [emily@sermontranscribers.net](mailto:emily@sermontranscribers.net)