

## **An Empty Life (4): The Emptiness of Work**

**Ecclesiastes 2:18-26**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes, chapter 2. As you're turning there, I want to remind you that the thesis statement for this book is found in the very opening verses, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." In other words, the thesis statement of the Book of Ecclesiastes is the Preacher's claim that life is empty. That's how he puts it; bluntly, brutally, and desperately-- life is empty. Now, he comes to modify that slightly, in fact, in the passage before us, we see his first slight modification of that thesis statement. Later, we'll see that his statement is actually this: life is empty under the sun, apart from God, apart from a living relationship with the living God. And much of the Book of Ecclesiastes is taken up with the Preacher showing you ways that people use to try and find an escape route out of that meaninglessness, out of that emptiness, out of that futility that is life apart from God. The Preacher has already told us how some people look to wisdom as the way they will find meaning and satisfaction and happiness in life, but after exploring wisdom, he said it led him to greater despair. A wise man looking at this life, full force, without the hope which we have in God, is a man who will be depressed. And that's exactly where the Preacher leaves us in his exploration of wisdom as an escape route from futility. Then, of course, he explored the escape route of pleasure, hedonism. He would fill himself up with voluptuous sensuality on every side. He would not deny himself anything, and in this he would find satisfaction and happiness. And he explores this, and his finding again is that pleasure and hedonism does not provide meaning and satisfaction in life.

So, where do you go from there? Where do you go when the best of human wisdom can't supply meaning to life, and when pleasure can't supply satisfaction either? That leads us to Ecclesiastes 2:18, let us hear God's word:

Thus I hated all the fruit 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 will 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. 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 wind.

Amen, this is God's word, may He add His blessing to it, let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we bow before You and we ask that You would open our eyes to behold truth from Your word, and that we would not simply think about it and reflect upon it, but that we would embrace it and act upon it, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Well, the Preacher takes us from the contemplative life; wisdom is the way of meaning, to the sensuous life; pleasure as the way of meaning and satisfaction, to the active life, work, vocation, projects, activity as the way that meaning can be supplied for life. Work, my work, it's important, it's successful, it's beneficial; maybe I can find meaning in life via my work. That's what he was saying, that's what many of us are saying. We'll find meaning, we'll import meaning into our lives through our work. Now, work is a wonderful thing, and a work ethic is a wonderful thing, and our work ethic is a great strength, and by and large, has come to us from biblical origins, but the evil one can use even good things against us and if we're trying to find meaning in our work alone, if we're trying to find significance and satisfaction in our work, then the Preacher is telling us we will not find it there. In fact, in this passage he will tell us three things about work. First, he will tell us why work won't work as the way of meaning and satisfaction, and you'll see that in verses 18 and 19. Then in verses 20-23, he will tell us why work alone, work apart from a living relationship with God, always leads to despair. Finally, in verses 24-26, he will tell us about the kind of work that satisfies.

### **I. Work, however fulfilling cannot supply the answer to meaning and satisfaction apart from God.**

In verses 18 and 19, the Preacher tells us that work will not work as the source of the provision of meaning and significance in life. He says apart from God, work is but drudgery and toil and emptiness, that work, however fulfilling, cannot supply the answer to meaning and satisfaction apart from God.

The word he uses for *work*, in verse 18, is a very broad term. It's used sometimes for toil, but in other places generally it's used to refer to our daily responsibility, and it can more broadly apply to those greater quests that people embark upon, whether it's politics, social reform, or something else, not just the way someone provides for one's family. And the Preacher has rehearsed to us already in this book different ways he sought work as a way of finding fulfillment, as in chapter 1 verse 3, where he asks the question, "What advantage does a man have in all his work which he does under the sun." He's asking a question that will culminate in our text today. Then, in chapter 2 verses 4-6, notice he says, "I enlarged my works," and then gives you a catalog of the works he built and enlarged upon. In verses 10-11, he says "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 of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor." Now remember verse 10, for we'll contrast it to something in a moment. "For my heart was pleased because of all my labor, and this was my reward for all my labor." Then, in verse 11, "Thus I considered all my activities that my hands had done and my labor which I had exerted, and behold, all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun." Again, in verse 17, he says, "So I hated life for the work that had been done under the sun was grievous to me, because everything is futility and striving after the wind." And in verse 18, we see again, "Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I labored under the sun."

Now, listen to what the Preacher is saying. He is saying that, upon reflection, he has hated the fruit, the result, the ends, and the effects of his labor. That's interesting because, if we recall verse 10, while he was doing his labor, he enjoyed it, and got a lot of results from it, and enjoyed the results of the labor, but when he pulls back and reflects upon it and asks the question, "Can this supply my life with meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction?" his answer is an emphatic, "No." Now, it's important to note that his frustration is not with the work. He enjoyed the work. And his frustration is not that he's not getting enough return for his work. He's not sitting around griping about losing money on the market over the last five years. He's done great in the market over the last five years. Everybody else may have lost, but he's done great over the last five years. He's not griping about the results of his work. He's griping that the fruit of his labor has not served to fulfill his deepest yearnings and desires as a human being.

Now we often gripe. We love to poormouth. And we like to poor mouth about what our work doesn't provide us. There are lots of songs which do this. We sing songs about the fruitlessness of labor. I've been approached during the week and told that I'd been imbalanced in my quotation of Rhythm and Blues and Pop 40, and I've been rebuked by Country Music fans that I made no references to Country Music lyrics. So, I'm going to quote from that esteemed theologian, Travis Tritt, this morning. In his song, "Livin' on Borrowed Time" he says:

Well, I'm swimming in debt and the money's all gone  
I ain't got nothing I can call my own

Worked my fingers to the blood and bone  
For a big disappointment when my paycheck comes  
If I only had a little I could do just fine  
I could put a down payment on some peace of mind  
But I'm hanging at the end of a credit line  
Lord, I'm just living on borrowed time  
My truck's financed through the Union Bank  
But I don't have enough to even fill the tank  
I'd take you for a drive, girl, but I just can't  
Cuz the damned ol' motor won't even crank  
My trailer's plenty big if we lived outside  
But I can't swing the payments on a double wide  
Better hold a place in that welfare line  
Cause I'm just livin' on borrowed time  
Yeah, I bought my wife a little diamond ring  
Her mom said, Hon, can't even see that thing  
It'll be paid off when I'm 65  
If I'm lucky enough to still be alive...

And it goes down from there.

That's not what Solomon is saying. Solomon is not saying, "I work my fingers to the bone, and I get nothing for it." He's saying, "Look, I work my fingers to the bone, I enjoyed doing it, I liked doing what I did, and I made more money than you'll ever know, and I'm totally empty." There's no satisfaction, there's no meaning in it. It's frustrating, it's grievous, it's despairing, he's been extremely fruitful but he's miserable. You see, the satisfaction one derives from one's work is not merely tied to the income derived from it. That can make it sweet. It's nice to have that. But that's not where ultimate satisfaction comes from and the evil one lies to you and says, "More will do it, more will give you that satisfaction that you're looking for," but the Preacher says, "No." He's had the more, he's had the most, and it didn't do it.

Notice in verses 18 and 19, the facts that he draws to our attention. He attributes the futility of work to these particular facts. First, that everything that we do has to be left to a successor. Why? Because we all die. So, from one standpoint we don't fully enjoy the fruits of our labors, and on the other hand, it is left to someone who didn't work for it. Secondly, notice he says that there's no guarantee that one's successor will be wise. He may be a fool. He may mispend everything that you've earned.

Thirdly, notice that even a foolish inheritor, however, will have control over the usage of all that the one who has left the legacy has accomplished and amassed. We're right back to the *Monopoly* illustration. It all goes back in the box. But it's worse than that. It goes back in the box for you because you're in the box. But whatever is left behind may be misused; whether it's your reputation, whether it's

an estate, whether it's the project that you've poured your whole life into. It may be twisted by fools to make a trap for naves. There's no guarantee of the continuation of your work for good in the next generation. Think of the millions and millions of dollars given by conservative evangelical Christians over the last 200 years to institutions which are now hard at work to destroy *everything* that they stand for. And that is just a picture of the kind of futility that the Preacher is speaking about.

Many pursue work in politics or in social reform because they think that they can thereby make the world a better place, but would Thomas Jefferson recognize the Democratic party; or would Abraham Lincoln recognize the Republican party were they alive today? Your successors can change everything. And the Preacher is thinking about that.

## **II. There is only despair in all work done “under the sun” that is, apart from God.**

He sums up in verses 20-23 and he tells you here why work alone, work considered apart from God leads to despair. It's one of the most moving points in the whole Old Testament. I completely despaired of all of the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. He's giving you a summary of the condition of working man apart from God. And he says there's only despair in all work that's done under the sun; in all work that's done apart from God. What a total contrast (verse 20), “I despaired of all of the fruit of my labor” to 1 Corinthians 15:58. Do you remember when Paul says to Christian disciples, “My beloved brothers, be steadfast and immovable and always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing that your labor is not in vain.” And the Preacher is saying the coordinate truth that apart from God, he can assure you that your labor is in vain. Hear that. He's saying apart from God, not that your labor *might* be in vain, but I can *assure* you that apart from God, your labor is in vain. And just as surely as Paul can say to Christians, “There's no wasted labor that you do in this life if it is done as unto the Lord.” So also the Preacher can say there is no meaningful labor in this life if it is not done unto the Lord. It's another case of solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know.

He speaks of two cases again here in verses 21-23, of giving to those who have not shared in one's toils. You know, it is one of the things about life. When you have not toiled to gain that which you receive, you approach that which you receive very differently. And the Preacher is thinking about that. I'm going to give this to somebody who hasn't toiled for it. How will they manage it? Because I grew with the toil in my stewardship of it and they won't have that opportunity. And secondly, notice that leaving one's gains to others. These are the futilities that he focuses on here. He's pointing out that work plus success minus God equals emptiness. He's pointing out that work plus success plus a large estate minus God equals emptiness. Work is not the way to find meaning in life apart

from God. Work and its most dramatically fruitful results fail to supply the meaning of this life.

And we can see illustrations like the ones that he draws attention to in verses 21 through 23 everywhere. Have you ever seen inheritance break up a family? There are lawyers in this room that have seen it. Have you ever seen an inheritance go to an outsider and break up a family or break down a family? Have you ever seen an inheritance ruin children? These are just examples of the kinds of futilities that the Preacher is speaking about.

### **III. The only way to know blessed labor is to receive the blessing of God.**

And then, in verses 24-26, finally we get a ray of light in this book. And he tells us that work done with and for God is one of the greatest blessings of life. He's telling us here about the kind of work that satisfies. Really, he's telling us about how work goes from a futile, empty exercise in drudgery to a great blessing. And he tells us in verse 24-26 that the only way to know blessed labor is to receive the blessing of God. This is the turning point right here in verse 24. The Preacher says in relationship with God, the work can never supply the meaning of life apart from Him, it does become a great blessing in Him and with Him and through Him. He says in verses 24 and 25, there is nothing better in life than to be able to sit down and enjoy one's labor, and yet he says, "I have discovered that that enjoyment is the grant of God." It doesn't come from having the right employer, it doesn't come from having the right employee, it doesn't even come from being in the right profession, it doesn't come from making a lot of money; it comes from the gift of God. God gives the gift of our ability to enjoy labor in this life.

And then he says something very dark and disturbing in verse 26. He says that the sinner, the person who is living this life under the sun apart from God, the person who is not living a life of trust in and obedience to the living of God, cannot enjoy his work—it is empty to him. Look at what he says. The sinner has been given by God the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to the one who is good in God's sight. Remind you of something that Jesus said in Matthew 13:12? "For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he will have an abundance; but he who does not have, even that which he does have shall be taken away from him."

In other words, apart from God, it is not just that those "in God" will have more, and those not "in God" will have less, but that those who are in God, trusting in God through Jesus Christ, will have all; and those who are not, will have nothing. That's how stark the contrast is in the gospel. You must be for it or against it. Because of this, "in Jesus" there is no meaningless work; there is no unimportant labor. All is seen, all is noted, all is rewarded, all is blessed in and by Him; but outside of Jesus, there is no blessing, there is no meaning, there is no satisfaction, there is no reward. There is only emptiness and futility. You

remember the Gibeonites? They had lied to the Israelites. Their lives were spared because they were in covenant with the Israelites. And do you remember what they made them? Hewers of wood and drawers of water—log splitters and water boys. That's what the Gibeonites, one of the most powerful clans in all of Canaan, became. But you know where they *became* log splitters and water boys? At the House of God. And David would once say, "I would rather be a door keeper in the House of God, than dwell in the tents of iniquity." That labor became a blessing to those Gibeonites, and the God of Israel never forgot those Gibeonites, even when Israel forgot those Gibeonites. None will find contentment, or purpose, or joy, or peace of mind of any lasting sort, apart from God in Christ; but *in* Christ, all--all who rest in Him, will find contentment, and purpose, and joy, and peace of mind in our labor. Have you noticed the irony in the bulletin? The sermon is called "The Emptiness of Work." Your last hymn is "Go, Labor On." It's meant to be that way because the labor that the first three stanzas of that last hymn calls us to, is not labor attempting to supply meaning apart from God; it's the labor that we do with joy and fullness because we are in Christ, and it is sweet, and it is satisfying, and it is fulfilling. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, teach us not to substitute the creature for the Creator, or work for our God, but to work in grace because of the grace of God. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

## **A Guide to the Morning Service**

### **The Worship of God**

What is biblical worship? Well, the Psalmist tells us succinctly. It is giving unto the Lord the glory due His name (Psalm 29:1-2). That is, in biblical worship we focus upon God Himself and acknowledge His inherent and unique worthiness. So worship is not about what we want or like, but rather about pleasing God. Praise decentralizes self. Furthermore, since the fall of man, true worship must be offered only through a divinely appointed mediator: the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, biblical worship is biblical. That is, its substance is derived and directed by the commands of God in the Bible. Thus, at First Presbyterian Church, our motto for worship is: "Sing the Bible, Pray the Bible, Read the Bible, Preach the Bible." So we strive to be sure that all that we sing is scriptural, that our prayers are saturated with scripture, that much of the word of God is read in each public service, and that the preaching here is based on the Bible.

### **The Call to Worship**

Biblical worship is always a response to God's gracious revelation of Himself to His people. He takes the initiative to come to us in grace and seek us out, before we ever respond to Him. Hence, all our worship services begin with a scriptural "call to worship" (that is, the content of the "call" comes from God's own word

quoted and pronounced by the minister). In this “call” we are reminded that God always takes the initiative. He always comes toward His people first, in grace. Our worship is a reflexive response to His gracious call.

### **The Twenty-Third Psalm**

At the end of the morning pastoral prayer today, we will recite the beloved Twenty-third Psalm. This psalm is among the first things children memorize in our Sunday School and so even our youngest will be able to join in this scriptural acknowledgment of who God is and what He has done for us. If you have forgotten this beloved passage or need to refresh your memory, please note that the text of the version we will say together today (in the beautiful and still well-known King James Version) is found in the inside cover of your Pew Bibles.

### **The Sermon**

We are now in the midst of a sermon series called “An Empty Life? Asking the Hard Questions, *A Study of Ecclesiastes*.” Take a hard look at your life. Does it mean anything? What’s it all about? Does it matter? Is there significance in what you are doing? Do you have a real sense of purpose? Do you know what you are here for? The author of Ecclesiastes wrestled with these hard questions, and came to know the answer. Come join us on his quest on summer Sunday mornings. Sermons are available for check-out or purchase in the Church Library/Bookstore. See also <[www.fpcjackson.org](http://www.fpcjackson.org)>.

### **The Psalm and Hymns**

*Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim* (Psalm 135:1-7, 21)

We begin our sung praise today with a lively setting of a text of part of Psalm 135 to a tune from Haydn's *Creation* (“The Heaven's are Telling”). This psalm and tune are both now familiar to our congregation (we also sing it to Addison's wonderful hymn text “The Spacious Firmament on High”). The psalm exhorts us to praise God because of His name, His goodness, His covenant blessings, His sovereignty, and His providence.

*When Morning Gilds the Skies*

This hymn is one of our congregation's favorites. Written by an unknown German author around 1800, it was translated by Edward Caswall in 1853. The text calls on us to praise Jesus Christ in every circumstance by repeating the exhortation “May Jesus Christ be praised” in a variety of typical situations in Christian experience. The tune is rousing and helps build the sense of energy that corresponds to the widening of the scope of the lyric's call for praise.

*Go, Labor On* (stanzas 1-3)



The Gospel transforms the potential drudgery of earthly toil into an eternally valuable kingdom venture. We celebrate this Gospel transformation of our work in this great hymn by Bonar.

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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