

The Search for Meaning
Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

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Scr. Reading: Eccl 1:12-2:26
Chasing the Wind

Ever been in a situation where you've set a destination, you've set your route, but once you begin your journey you realize the path you chose isn't going to work? You can't get there from here?

I spent the summer after college traveling the western US with a group of 6 friends. One night we found ourselves about 3-4 hours southeast of the Grand Canyon, which we planned to visit the next day. A local man overheard our plans and strongly urged us to be on the lookout for Route 66. I believe he used words like "beautiful," "scenic," and "lots of wildlife." But what really caught my attention was when he used what I thought was the word "shortcut."

The next morning we started off and, just as our new friend had said, about 10 miles up we saw a sign on the north side of the road for Route 66. In retrospect, I probably should have paid more attention to the hinky bells going off in my head. The sign was a faint, rusty square mounted on an abnormally short, crooked metal post. The road itself looked more like a Forest Service trail than a road for motor vehicles—just a dirt path that bent off into the trees and disappeared. Exactly the way a shortcut would look, right? At least that's what I told myself...

I might have caught on earlier, except for the fact that I didn't expect this to be a short drive. I knew it was quite a ways to the Grand Canyon, so I was more than willing to keep on going. Making matters worse, the road soon started to fork off in different directions about every 5-6 miles, and there weren't even rusty bent signs marking these new options. So, of course, I did what any self-respecting man would do in those circumstances: I drove faster. We had no idea where we were, but we were making great time!

Little by little the comments and questions started to come from the back of the van: "Are we on the right track? Is this a van or a 4-wheeler? Are we still in Arizona? You OK up there?" I tried to distract them by telling them to look for wildlife, but after a couple hours it became apparent even to me that this was not going to work. "Grand Canyon? Yeah, you can't get there from here."

Maybe you know what I'm talking about—that sinking feeling that all this time you've been on the wrong track, and if you're ever going to reach your destination, you'll have to find a new route altogether.

"The Preacher" in Ecclesiastes found himself in a situation like that, only his quest was way more important than seeing the Grand Canyon:

1:3 *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

He was looking for meaning in life. He's asking: What's the point of this? Where's the benefit to my life? When all is said and done, what will remain from my existence?

Do you ever stop to ask those kinds of questions? Why am I doing this? What gain is there in my life? **The Preacher wants to talk to you about that question.** He's pushing you, forcing you to stop avoiding it. Why?

vv12-13 *I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.¹³ 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.*

He's pushing you, because God is pushing you. "It is an unhappy business God has given humans to be busy with." Those nagging questions in the back of your mind—you didn't come up with those on your own. God set you on this pursuit of meaning:

3:11 *God has put eternity in our hearts.*

God made us this way. He wrote into our souls a longing for something transcendent. Animals don't have this. They don't think this way. You won't find your dog moping around the house with angst, wondering about the meaning of it all: "Are milk bones and belly scratches all there is?" Only human beings do this. It's a task God gave us.

Maybe you never ask these questions—you keep yourself distracted, busy. Americans are experts at distracting ourselves, filling every bored moment with something to keep us occupied. The Preacher won't let us do that. He wants to push us and force us to face the end of the road in our journey. Are you sure this path leads where you want to go?

Chapter 1 is a big-picture summary of his quest; chapter 2 gives the detail on three specific routes he chose trying to find meaning in life—pleasure (vv1-11), smarts (vv12-17), and work (vv18-23). He's forcing you to ask yourself: "**Will the path you've chosen really lead to a**

meaningful life? Are you sure you can get there from here?"

Before we even start down any of these three paths, he gives us his answer:

v14 *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

It's all vanity. It's all meaningless, useless, futile. The quest for meaning is like "chasing the wind." He's not saying there's nothing there, no meaning, no substance to life. He's saying it's hidden, ungraspable, elusive. The wind is real; you just can't use your hands to catch it. You can't get there from here:

v15 *What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

"What is crooked..." = beyond our ability. "what is lacking..." = beyond our capacity. In other words, this is just how it is for mortal man. We aren't powerful enough to change it, and we aren't smart enough to solve it.

vv16-18 *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."¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

Solomon was rich, smart, and popular. He had hundreds of wives, accomplished fabulous construction projects. Who better to tell us whether pleasure, smarts, and work will give meaning to our lives? Our resources are limited, so we blame our dissatisfaction on our limitations: "If only I had more money. If only I had a different spouse." Solomon is the perfect person to say, "No, it's not your limitations. I had none of those, and I still wasn't satisfied. The problem isn't the roadblocks in your path; the problem is you're on the wrong path altogether. None of it has any meaning."

The Preacher has named his destination: meaning in life. He's chosen his three paths: pleasure, smarts, and achievement—might be the same paths you're trying. He tells us his result: vanity. **Do you have the courage to follow him?**

The Vanity of Pleasure (2:1-11)

v1 *I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy*

yourself." But behold, this also was vanity.² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine - my heart still guiding me with wisdom - and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

Notice the phrase "my heart still guiding me with wisdom" (cf. v9 "My wisdom remained with me.") There are two types of pleasure: the respectable pleasures of refinement like aesthetics, culture, beauty, and accomplishment; and the wanton pleasures of abandonment like wild parties, free sex, and reckless living. Nobody really mistakes the latter for the meaningful life. That fire burns too hot, and you're left a drunk, a stoner, or a meth-head. **The Preacher went for pleasures of refinement.** He didn't lose his mind at a party; he built a respectable, enviable life. That's what he means by "my heart still guiding me with wisdom." He was savoring good wine, not getting passed-out drunk. When he says, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself" (v1), he's not acting like a college frat boy. He's acting like a citizen of Douglas County. He's acting just like you. Notice:

vv4-6 *I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.*

He's pursuing the deep, soulful, sophisticated pleasures of art, culture, and career accomplishment. His quest included material pleasures too—financial wealth, priceless treasures, musicians, lovers...

vv7-8 *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.⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man.*

Sounds like an amazing life, doesn't it?! It gets better:

vv9-11 *So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.¹⁰ 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, and this was my reward for all my toil.¹¹ Then 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.*

He got to have everything he wanted! This is the life everybody dreams about! No question, there was some enjoyment in it. But it didn't satisfy: "vanity, striving after wind, nothing gained."

ILLUS: LeBron, after his first championship: "What really got me to this point was how short of a time it lasted. The championship lasts [snapping] just like that. The confetti rains, you go in the locker room, pop the champagne, you do the media, you have the parade and then it's over. It's over. You're looking around and everybody's back to normal. I was like, 'Wow, that was an unbelievable 48 hours. I want it again.' It was the best 48 hours of my life and I needed that again." Instead of recognizing the futility of it all, he doubles down: "I'm at a point now where nothing else matters in basketball besides winning. That's what I'm here for. That's where my passion lies. It's where my work ethic lies. It's my hunger to put up another banner in this arena. I have a drive that's burning inside of me, and I want to continue to be successful."

Some are more insightful and honest:

ILLUS: Chris Hemsworth: "You get to Hollywood, you achieve something and then you realize, 'S--t, it didn't actually bring me the happiness I thought it was going to. It didn't fix anything. Look, I mean I don't wake up, look in the mirror and go, 'Yep, all is perfect.'"

ILLUS: Troy Aikman: "I'll never forget when I was 12 years old. I couldn't wait until the day I was 16 and could drive a car. I thought that'd be the end of life's problems. I mean, you can drive! What is there left? And then I turned 16 and realized there were still problems. Well, I kind of said the same thing after my first Super Bowl. You think once you win it, all your problems are solved professionally. But I've won two now, and it hasn't solved a thing. Not a thing."

Why not? They don't say. Some experiences are like that—you assume you should be satisfied but you aren't, and no matter how hard you try you can't explain why. The Preacher doesn't tell us why he wasn't satisfied; just the simple fact of his experience: "there was nothing to be gained." He can't explain why. All your calculations before and after say you should be satisfied, but you're just not. This small pleasure brought a little taste of meaning; surely this ultimate pleasure will bring ultimate meaning... but it doesn't. And we are left with no idea why. But here's the question: will you have the courage and the honesty to admit you can't get there from here?

The Vanity of Smarts (2:12-17)

True "wisdom" in the Scriptures begins with the fear of the Lord. The Preacher has explicitly abandoned that perspective for the purposes of his struggle, and when he speaks of "wisdom" in most of this book, he's

talking about the best that human reasoning has to offer—which I've called "smarts."

v12 *So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. "What can the man do who comes after the king?" = If he, Solomon, can't figure this out, what hope could anyone else possibly have?*

vv13-14 *Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.*

Wisdom is better than the alternative. It offers some practical gain – namely, it protects you from self-inflicted harm ("fool walks in darkness"), but...

vv15-16 *Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.¹⁶ 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!*

Human wisdom helps only in the short term. **Everybody—fool and wise—dies and is forgotten.** Death and time erase all distinction between you and your fellowmen. It's the universe's cruel inverse equivalent to the millennial generation's trophy ceremony. Instead of "Thanks for participating. Everybody's a winner! Here, have a trophy," the universe says, "Thanks for playing. Everybody's a loser. Here, have some death."

Verse 17 is one of the most cynical, hopeless verses in the book:

v17 *So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

Ever felt like that? Choose the wrong path and this is where life will always leave you—hating everything.

The Vanity of Work (2:18-23)

vv18-19 *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.*

There's something haunting the Preacher on his quest for meaning, do you see what it is? The specter of Death:

v16 *The wise dies just like the fool.*

Human smarts can't forestall the inevitability of death. And now here:

v18 *I must leave all my work to the man who will come after me.*

Hard work and career achievement can't overcome the futility of it.

Death is coming for us all. **Whatever you're looking to for meaning in life better be able to deal with that.**

vv20-21 *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.*

All your work—the legacy of your life—will have to pass to someone who did nothing to earn it. Your work is their gain. It's vanity!

vv22-23 *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.*

The restless night of the high achiever. Work hard all day to accomplish and earn, and then worry all night that your legacy and wealth won't last.

The Preacher's Conclusion (2:24-26)

vv24-25 *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, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

Why this switch from “vanity” to “find joy”? Something massively important changes in verse 24. Prior, it's all “under the sun” or “under heaven” (1:13,14; 2:3,11,17,18,19,20). It's the operating assumption that this life down here, on earth, below the sky is all there is. So whatever answer we find must be found right here, “under the sun,” with no regard to anything supernatural or transcendent. **The Preacher is looking for something that transcends this world—meaning in life—by searching only in this world.** To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, that's like Hamlet searching his own attic for Shakespeare. No wonder it's all vanity!

Did you notice the new word in this conclusion that doesn't appear anywhere else in this chapter? “God!” God is not mentioned in this whole chapter until now. The despair of life “under the sun,” life without anything transcendent, life without God, forced the Preacher to consider God. When you acknowledge God, you actually get to enjoy everything else: “eat, drink, find enjoyment in your toil. This is from the hand of God!” **Once we stop pretending that the material world is all we need, we can finally enjoy the material world as it is.** Money, pleasure, work, food, relationships—all of the good things God gives in

life—**make wonderful blessings but a terrible god.** If you make them the source of ultimate meaning in your life, the only result will be vanity and chasing the wind. You can't get there from here! We spoil them when we try to get more out of them than they can offer. But when God is your god, you get to enjoy everything else:

v26 *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.*

Please God and have fun. Don't fear God and you're chasing the wind—gathering, collecting, and then passing into vanity.

A thousand years after the Preacher, another though provoking Teacher came on the scene in Jerusalem. Have you ever noticed how Jesus' teaching and life were taken up with food? “I am the bread of life. I am the living water.” His first miracle turned water to wine. He fed 5000 men plus women and children with a single lunch. He taught that the kingdom of God would be like a great banquet at the end of the age. He offered some of His most profound and intimate teaching at His final supper with the disciples. One book sums up Jesus' whole ministry: “Jesus literally ate His way through the Gospels.” (H. Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*). He's bringing Ecclesiastes 2:24 to life: “Eat, drink, and find enjoyment in all your toil.” Life with God is like a feast—deep, satisfying, meaningful!

That was Jesus' life—a veritable feast with people and with God. How unexpected then to hear Him say on the cross “I thirst.” Theologians have long felt there's more in that statement than meets the eye. It comes right after He says “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” There it is. Life without God is vanity.

We've been using the metaphor of a journey, a path, asking whether it will lead to meaning in life. There's another metaphor in the OT for this same quest—thirst, a quest to find that soul-satisfying water. Our problem is, we almost never seek to find it in God:

Jeremiah 2:12-13 *Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, ¹³ for 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.*

That's what Jesus was saying when He said, “I thirst.” He was taking our

vanity, our search for meaning apart from God into His own soul and He hung there, separated from God, thirsty and empty. Why? Because looking for meaning apart from God isn't just futile; it's wrong. It's wrong in the same way it's wrong for a husband to ignore his loving wife and instead be all taken up with TV and hobbies and work. That's not just futile for him; it's personal to her! It's wrong.

Jesus is the Savior you need, the water you crave, and the meaning in life you're seeking. Trust Him.

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