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In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, Solomon, is leading us in a quest to find the meaning and purpose of life here on earth.

Now there are two ways in which you can lead people to see the real meaning of life – you can use positive apologetics and tell people directly about Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, who gives meaning and joy to a meaningless life. Or you can use negative apologetics and show how a life without God leads to vanity, emptiness, pointlessness. That also is an important way to lead people to Christ. And that's what Solomon is talking about here.

In this quest for the meaning of life, Solomon takes us down several roads that lead to nowhere: He takes us down the road of human wisdom (science, research, human reason) and it ends in vanity (see Ecclesiastes 1:12-18). Then he takes us down the road of amusements (pleasure, comedy, partying, following your feelings) and that ends in vanity too (see Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

And now he compares these two ways of living life (wisdom and madness) and sees how in both you end up dead. So he concludes: **I hated life**. You might say: *Wash your mouth! Don't talk like that!* But this is the language of a believer: in this sin-cursed world (subjected to vanity) where we all end up dead, there is much to hate about life here under the sun. God does not command us all to walk around with a Wal-mart smile. There are some things that are hateful and *faith hates them*.

But faith also sees that God has given us a way out of things that are hateful (vanity) and opened up a door of joy! *Faith can actually enjoy life in spite of all its problems*.

## **How to hate life God's way (how to handle hatred of life in a way that trusts God)**

### **1. Solomon's rude awakening**

<sup>12</sup> **Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly...** Solomon now comes to a new stage in his quest for the meaning of life: that stage is despair. Here's how he got there: He compared His first attempt at finding meaning and satisfaction (through human wisdom, the mind: research, education, technology, exploration, science) with his second attempt at finding meaning and satisfaction (through a very different pathway of feelings: the pursuit of pleasure through laughter, luxury, alcohol, music, sex, and fame.)

He engaged in some philosophy and reflection to compare and contrast these two roads I had travelled in search of life. Which of these 2 is better: the road of disciplined reason, or the road of undisciplined (mad) passion? Which is better: *rationalism* or *romanticism*? The philosophers still ask the same question.

<sup>12b</sup> **...for what can the man do who succeeds the king?**— I did this because I was in a unique position to do so as a result of all that I learned in study and experience: *Who can find out more than I? I must pass on my findings to those who follow*.

At first Solomon was rather pleased with his reflection: <sup>13</sup> **Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.** <sup>14</sup> **The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.** (13-14a) Obviously human wisdom (education, science, research) is a better way to live than self-indulgent wine, women and song. The one way is like walking with eyes in your head, and the other way is like walking without eyes. You'll have fewer bumps and bruises and blunders. Let's scrap the unruly passions for the enlightened mind!

Suddenly a thought occurred to him that destroyed his peace and plunged him into despair: **Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all.** <sup>15</sup> **So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, it also happens to me, and why was I then more wise?"** Then I said in my heart, **"This also is vanity."** (Ecclesiastes 2:14b-15)

Death is going to overtake me whether I'm wise or foolish, whether I pursue education or pleasure. "Yeah," says the wise man, *"At least I saw and understood more than you the problems and troubles of life and could talk about death meaningfully!"* "Big deal," says the fool, *"I'd rather go through life with my eyes closed and avoid the doom and gloom of it all! You think and work till you die. I party till I die! My way is better."*

<sup>15b</sup> **Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity."** <sup>16</sup> **For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!**

He realized that he could not conquer death, and if you can't conquer death, life has no real, lasting value and significance. Everything you do gets lost. It gets handed over to the next generation so they can die too. Oh, maybe they'll enjoy a little more convenience because of your hard work and research. But they won't enjoy more meaning. **Vanity!**

Gregg Easterbrook in his book "The Progress Paradox" shows that *though life is getting better in North America because of technology, people are feeling worse!* Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: *Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal.*

Alexander the Great, the powerful world-leader of Greece, son of the Great Philip the Great, one time found his philosopher-friend, Diogenes, standing alone in a field looking intently at a pile of bones. A: *What are you doing?* D: *I'm looking for the bones of your father Philip, but I can't distinguish them from the bones of the slaves.* Death is the great equalizer.

Commentator Derek Kidner: *If the same fate overtakes them both, and that fate is extinction, it robs every man of his dignity and every project of its point.*

## **2) deep despair**

2:17-19: So I hated life. (17a) That realization that death makes nothing of all of us brought him to the bottom:

<sup>18</sup> **Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun ....** <sup>20</sup> **Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun.** Now we want to take Solomon aside and administer a rebuke: *Solomon, now you're taking it too far. You shouldn't hate life. Stop it!*

But wait a minute. Who says you should stop hating life? Aren't there things about life in this fallen world that are hateful? Think of Jesus going to the tomb of Lazarus, everybody's weeping, angry at how death has snatched another life away! Here comes Jesus with a giant smile on his face, saying, "Don't worry, be happy. I'm going to beat death up. Just watch Me!"?? No! He cried. He entered the pain, the suffering, the sorrow. And the anger. The Bible says He was deeply angry: deeply moved (2x) = *snort with anger*. (John 11:33,38)

We must be careful here: there is a wrong way to hate life, to hate that God made me, to hate the laws God has for me, to hate the calling God has given me, to hate people as people and want them dead, to hate discipline and correction. That's the fool's way of hating life. But there's also a wise way to hate life: a way that pleases God - to hate the misery, the sin, the death, the murders, the unjust wars, the lies, the materialism, the exploitation of people, the waste, hypocrisy, the pride, my own sin.

We should realize that it is okay to hate what life has become as a result of sin. It is okay to hate life in its fallen state, brokenness, abuse, conflict, fighting, drudgery, bureaucratic waste, worry, disease, crime, and death. A relationship is broken; a loved one gone. We should hate what sin has done to the good life God made. We should hate what arthritis and alzheimers and Parkinsons do to life. We should hate what abuse and oppression and persecution do to life. We should hate work in its fallen state of drudgery, repetition, break-downs, injury, personnel problems, workplace politics, computer viruses, bureaucracy, Jeremiah and Job even cursed the day of their birth!

And so what comes of it all: all your life and all your work and all your wisdom and all your wealth and all your projects?

-and all this so you can leave your wealth to someone whose going to do who-knows-what with it? What happened to all Solomon's wealth and wisdom and power? 92% of it went to Jeroboam who took the people away from God, and 8% went to Rehoboam who wasted most of it in foolishness. No matter how much you carefully try to secure your future by training your children and making your wishes known and protecting it with legal walls, you simply don't have control of how it will be used. They will do with it what they want, and you won't be there to control it. <sup>18</sup> **Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because 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 rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity.**

**Vanity** is Ecclesiastes' favorite word (next to *joy*, believe it or not!) Vanity means *fleeting, pointless, and empty*. It means that because of death all your projects, all the good things you do will come to nothing because of death. This world was subjected by God to vanity because of our sin. Vanity is real - it's the truth of Scripture and the experience of life - and God (through Solomon's wisdom) is helping us deal with the real.

We should be willing to see and accept that reality. Oh, I know that in Christ there's much more to the story - Hallelujah! - but misery is still part of the story of this life. And as Christ came down to enter into that story of

sin and suffering and shame (vanity), and empathize with us, and look honestly with us at the state of things, in order to carry us through it to the other side, so we must be willing to enter into that with others and look at it honestly with them in order to walk through them with it to the other side, that that we might know both the hatefulness of the darkness but also but also rejoice in the hopefulness of the Light.

### **20-23 - so my heart began to despair**

**<sup>20</sup> Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.** Like David, Solomon entered the pit of despair: **Reproaches have broken my heart so that I am in despair.** (Ps. 69:20)

**<sup>22</sup> For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.**

You did the work, someone who did not do the work will benefit!

You contributed decades to a company, then you get a party, a watch, and that's it; you're replaced, forgotten, and somebody else gets the credit for what you started. And you say, what's the point?

You lay awake at night worrying about your work, worrying about succession planning, worrying about your legacy, wondering what's going to be left of your life's work.

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy said this problem nearly drove him to suicide at the age of 50: My question was the simplest of questions lying deep in the soul of every man, and one cannot live without an answer to this question: what will come of what I do today and tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live? Why wish for anything or do anything? Is there any meaning in my life that death will not destroy?

### **3) real happiness**

But there's good news! God has a pathway through this hateful of life, so that in the worst of times we might enjoy the best of times, and in the darkness we might see the light. Here is the first place in Ecclesiastes where is mentioned as the answer to the quest for the meaning of life:

**<sup>24</sup> Nothing is better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. <sup>25</sup> For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>26</sup> For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is good* before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.**

**Joy** is a continuing refrain as you study the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon takes to the edge of the pit of darkness and despair and has us look long and hard at it, to understand our need for God and His salvation. But right in the middle of this, he will suddenly interrupt the vanity of life with a call to rejoice. But where does this joy come from? Is it just a feeling or an imagination that we're called to summon from within ourselves?

Happiness is not achieved by our earthly efforts and pursuits, but received as the gift of God, from His hand. He is the Only One who can give you satisfaction and enjoyment in food, drink, work, vacations, marriage, family, friends. When you don't look for your life in this world, but live for God, for His pleasure, then He will give you by His grace give you the ability to enjoy life in this unjust, wicked and crazy world. He did that by sending Jesus to destroy the vanity of life in His own death and resurrection, so that in Him your life and work are not in vain.

And more than that: you may know that when all is said and done you will not have lived in vain - in the resurrection, the righteous in Christ will be given this world and will receive all the world's wealth and devote it to God's glory. The whole world belongs to Christ and His people in the end! **For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.** (I Corinthians 3:22-23)

And we are called to live in the midst of this hateful life neither by a) pretending away the hateful, nor by b) becoming cynical and hopeless, but by looking for God's victory and comfort in the midst of all our troubles.

Zach Eswine gives the following illustration: imagine a basketball team made up of 7-8 year olds. One team cheats, trips, trash talks and pushes. And the referees are friends of the coaches of the cheating team. And you coach the opposing team, what should you do?

1. you can quit. I hate this game. There's no point in trying because no matter what you do you're not going to win and you're only going to get hurt. But if you do that, follow is the only game left in town, the only team left on the court.

2. you can join them - "they break the rules, we break the rules. They get nasty, we get nasty," you tell your team. It's the only way to win. But that's meaningless too! That still means folly is the only game left in town; that still hands the world over to wickedness.

3. or you can take the way of heavenly wisdom: there is a God, and His ways are right, and He created us to live and work and play here in this world, and even though it is fallen, we were created for Him for this, so we are going to play by His rules and live by His Word in this hateful world, just to show that there is a God and there is another way. If we live for Him, not only is life not lived in vain, it is worthwhile and that produces happiness and fulfillment to know that a life lived for God is not in vain. It won't fix the world, it won't take away sin, it won't remove the problems, and it's likely to get you hurt a lot.

We don't play to win or to advance ourselves. We play for God. Rather than allow good to be overcome by evil, we seek to overcome evil with good. We hate life in its fallen state not as those who give up on this world, and not as those who give upon God and redemption but as those who know the victory is ours - and one day all that we hate will be removed.

There is a Man who hated life in its fallen state enough to commit His entire life to restoring it - His Name is Jesus! Because He is the Son of God, He overcome the misery of life and sat down at the right hand of God, and those who serve Him in this life may be sure that what they hate will one day be swallowed up in victory through Christ. And one day, one day, all that is hateful will be removed. The Garden of Eden will return in even greater glory! And God will be praised forever and His people will be eternally happy in Him!