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WEAR THE HEADPHONES

Ecclesiastes 1-2

Life so often is chaotic and unexpected. You no doubt remember our little adventure when we were visiting in the Midwest and woke up to find a bat orbiting our bed. That was disturbing, but it got worse. The next day our doctor son informed us the protocol is if you wake up with a bat in your room you need to get rabies shots. We didn’t believe it at first, but he told us bats have such small teeth they can bite you and you won’t know it. If you wait until you get symptoms of rabies it’s too late. At that point rabies is 100% fatal. We got the rabies shots, even though some people thought it was unnecessary. This past week a friend of ours who lives back there sent us a news article. It was about a man who also woke up with a bat in his room. He didn’t get the shots because he was sure he had not been bitten. The article reported that he died last week of rabies.

Like I said, life is so chaotic. Amir Husain is a highly successful artificial intelligence entrepreneur. His latest company, SparkCognition, is partnering with Boeing in an effort to develop an aviation operating system that will integrate unmanned passenger aircraft into the airline industry. I hope that doesn’t work. I don’t want HAL flying an airliner that I’m on. However, Husain has written a book entitled *The Sentient Machine*. In it he says, “the universe around us is clearly a consequence of computation.” He cites several examples of this. One is the Fibonacci sequence, a well known series of numbers created by adding two consecutive integers to create the next number in the sequence. So you start with 0 plus 1 and that gives 1. Now you have 1 plus 1 giving the next number, 2. Then it’s 1 plus 2 equals 3, followed by 2 plus 3 equals 5, then 3 plus 5 equals 8, and so on. This sequence is key to designs found throughout nature in leaves, flower petals, nautilus shells, hurricanes and spiral galaxies. He asks, “Can this be by chance?” Seeing computation behind so much means there must be intelligence. He said that what is missing is the answer to the question, “what is this all for?” He concluded, “We still don’t know the purpose for our existence.”

Today I am starting a series of sermons out of the book of Ecclesiastes. I am going to cherry pick a few passages from this book, kind of a “greatest hits” approach. This book looks at the chaos of this world and points out that if all you have is what you see here, you will end up right where Husain did, concluding we don’t know the purpose for our existence, or maybe even more deciding there is no purpose for our lives. The expression “under the sun” shows up a lot in the book. It represents what happens when we try to understand life using only what happens on this earth with no outside revelation. This book is relevant for many in our culture, because ours is an “under the sun” culture. Our society’s elites have a worldview that excludes divine revelation as a possibility. That’s the definition of the “under the sun” approach to life. How does life look if we rule out God altogether? If, indeed, the material world is all there is, there is no God, no spiritual realm, no divine revelation, no life after death, what will we conclude about life? As you will see, the writer comes to a very different conclusion than many in our culture do. Let’s look at Ecclesiastes 1-2.

LIFE UNDER THE SUN IS FULL OF FUTILITY

The writer of this book refers to himself as the Teacher. The Hebrew word is Qoheleth, which doesn’t have an exact equivalent in English. It can mean teacher, or wise person, or collector of sayings. In this case it is a wise man who has gathered wisdom and is now examining its implications. He begins the book saying, “Meaningless, meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.” Well that’s pretty depressing.

The word translated “meaningless” is another word that doesn’t match up exactly with an English meaning. Some translate it “vanity,” and some “fleeting.” I think it is close to the word “futile.” In verse 3 the author asks what people gain from all their labors, from all the things they attempt “under the sun.” If you have an under the sun perspective you end up with the sum total of nothing. We come into life with nothing, and we go out with nothing. What does it all amount to? It’s a zero sum game. The question in the Teacher’s mind is “What is the gain in life?” His answer is that it is all futile, it comes to nothing.

Verse 7 says the streams return to the sea, but the sea is never full. The streams end up going back to the place they came from. The cycle continues year in and year out and nothing ever really changes. All things are wearisome.

When I was young there was an endeavor that captured my attention. The old Soviet Union launched a man made satellite into orbit around the earth when I was a young boy. Then they put a man in space when Yuri Gagarin made one orbit around the earth in his Vostok I spacecraft. This created near panic in our country because we stumbled around, mostly blowing up rockets on the launchpad, not appearing to make any headway on the manned exploration of space. Then President Kennedy set an audacious goal of the US putting a man on the moon in less than 10 years. For a young boy this was an exciting and inspiring quest. Jerry and I were enthralled. We would wake up early in the morning to watch the launch of every mission, not missing even a minute of the drama. That eventually culminated in the events of July 20, 1969 when Neil Armstrong stepped out of a Lunar Excursion Module onto the surface of the moon. We were riveted to our television along with a good portion of the human race. What a monumental achievement. We had done the seemingly impossible, accomplished something humans had dreamed of for a long time. It seemed like that event was ushering in a whole new era. Life was never going to be the same. One scholar has said that was the single most significant accomplishment of the 20th century.

It has been more than 50 years since that happened. Technology has advanced dramatically, bringing about many changes. But the truth is, life isn’t all that much different than it was back when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin first took strolls on the moon. Yes, communication and information technology is radically different, with cell phones, personal computers and the Internet. But the human condition is the same as it was that momentous day in 1969. Nothing essential has changed. And I’m still waiting for those flying cars that were supposed to be part of the future.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Verse 4 says, “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.” Each new generation thinks it is the culmination of human development and it is going to put things right, resolve the human condition. They have their years in the sun, then they become the old generation whose time has passed. They haven’t fixed anything, and they are replaced by a new generation that thinks they are the ones with the answers.

I am now way closer to the end of my life than I am to the beginning of it. What have I accomplished and what does it matter? In saying life under the sun is futile he is claiming that if all you have to look at is what happens here on earth, then none of it matters.

Philosopher Albert Camus is seen as a proponent of “absurdism,” which posits that while it is conceivable that meaning might exist somewhere in the universe, humans are incapable of finding it. Such ideas gave rise to the “Theater of the Absurd,” referring to plays that seek to portray the futility of human struggle in a senseless world. These plays have ridiculous conversations that make no sense, nothing really happens except often incoherent talk, and in the end it’s a whole bunch of nothing. The message of these plays is that we need to accept the futile human condition as it is and bear the emptiness and absurdity of it all with dignity, because we are alone in a meaningless universe.

Long before these relatively recent ideas came along the Teacher of Ecclesiastes was making the point that if all we have is what is under the sun, if we try to understand life merely from what we can see in our years here on earth, we will conclude that life is futile. The whole thing really is meaningless. In verse 14 the Teacher says, “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” About 5 years ago Laurie and I visited Michael and Carissa when they were living in Mississippi. While we were there we went for a few days down to Pensacola, Florida to enjoy the beach there. When we first got there it was raining, so that kind of took the beach out of our first day. But the second day was glorious. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, the beach is beautiful and the warm turquoise ocean waters were spectacular. We had a great time. But in the afternoon the pleasant, cooling breeze began to stiffen. It grew stronger and stronger. After a while it began to be a problem. Anything not weighted down began to blow away. Flotation devices began blowing down the beach, umbrellas were blown over. Then the sand started getting picked up, so sitting on the beach we were getting sand blasted. It was downright unpleasant. I wanted it to stop. Do you think I decided to try to run after the wind, grab it and force it to stop? Of course not, because that’s not possible. How would you even try to do that? The Teacher says you’d have as much chance of chasing after the wind as you would trying to get some meaning out of all our activities in this life, if all you have is what is under the sun.

Our little grandson, Wesley, has some interesting little habits. One of them is that he likes to put things in little holes. So when we are out on walks he finds various human made structures that have little holes in them. He likes to find sticks, leaves and pebbles and put them in those holes. He is quite serious about this endeavor and does it with great concentration. Why does he do this? What does it accomplish? What does it mean? It doesn’t mean anything and it doesn’t accomplish anything. If our cultural narrative is correct, which is kind of like the premise that Ecclesiastes examines, then everything we do is pretty much like Wesley’s actions. There is no real difference between putting a stick in a hole and landing a man on the moon or any of the other supposedly great things people do. In the end, they don’t mean anything.

THE TEACHER IS CREDIBLE

Beginning in verse 12 we essentially get the writer’s credentials. Such a hopeless, even cynical view of life might cause us to think these were the musings of a bitter loser whose life had been a disaster. But that was not the case at all. He tells us why we should pay attention to him.

He says in verse 12 he was king over Israel in Jerusalem. That was the second time he mentioned this fact. In verse 1 he introduced himself as “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Though he never identifies himself by name, many believe Solomon wrote this. He was literally the son of David, he was the king who ruled in Jerusalem. He was a wise man, at least at first. We will see some things in chapter 2 that are consistent with what Solomon did in his life.

This man was far from a down on his luck loser. He was the most powerful man in his nation. He “had it all.” He was famous, rich, intelligent, and powerful. As the king he had the freedom, resources and the time to do whatever he wanted, because he was the king. In verse 16 he said, “I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” He literally was the smartest man in the room. In other words, he’s saying, “Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.” And we can trust him. 1 Kings 4:29-31 says, “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else.”

A breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. How can you measure how much sand there is on the seashore? You can’t. This is an image for “no stinking way to figure that.” In other words, Solomon was way wiser than you or me. I’ve always wondered how would you measure the IQ of the smartest man in the world. You’d have to be smarter than him to measure it, so he wouldn’t be the smartest man in the world. The point here is we should pay attention to what this guy says, because he knew what he was talking about.

THE TEACHER TRIED IT ALL

How did the Teacher know that everything is futile and beyond fixing? He tried all of it, which he describes in 2:1-16. He started with pleasure. In 2:1 he said, “I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’” So he indulged himself. He went the “if it feels good, do it” route. He decided to party his brains out. If there had been an international jet set back then, he’d have led the pack. 1 Kings 4:22-23 says, “Solomon’s daily provisions were 30 cors of the finest flour and 60 cors of meal, 10 head of stall fed cattle, 20 of pasture fed cattle, and a hundred sheep and goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roebucks and choice fowl.” A cor was about 55 gallons, so think of 30 55 gallon drums of flour. This is a huge amount of food. Notice that even back then they had to provide for some people’s preference for grass fed cattle. This absurd amount of food was what was required to feed Solomon’s household and staff. But it also was likely that every day he had a huge feast. Party on dude. So partying was part of the deal, but he meant way more than that.

Notice in verses 4-5 he said he undertook big projects, building houses and planting vineyards and gardens. He tried to find pleasure in building his own personal Eden, including magnificent homes and lush landscaping. That is a way to experience pleasure. It feels better to live in a magnificent home that looks like something out of *Architectural Digest* than in a broken down double wide that’s dirty, smells musty and leaks when it rains.

I have had a long battle with lawns. I see some lawns that have thick, beautiful deep green grass, and I wonder how people make that happen. I’ve never been able to figure that one out. A few years ago Laurie and I decided we’d had enough. In our little pretend back yard we took out the grass and put down some high quality artificial turf. It’s been 3 or 4 years now, and I still get pleasure out of that. It looks terrific. Green, smooth, no weeds, no bare spots, no watering, no mowing, no trimming. It is a humble pleasure. Laurie got to add to it one of her longed for touches. We were able to put a fountain in the corner of the yard. Somehow the sound of water in a fountain is pleasing. The point here is that, yes, Solomon indulged in partying, but he also got pleasure out of building beautiful things.

People get pleasure out of fine food, fine clothing, art, music and many other beautiful things. Solomon went after all of it. In verse 10 he said, “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.” That also included a fat bank account. In verse 8 he said, “I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.” He got a lot of pleasure from being filthy rich.

Verse 8 tells us he got male and female singers. He got pleasure from hiring the rock stars of his day to entertain him. The NIV translation adds that he got “a harem as well, the delights of a man’s heart.” That’s a slightly sanitized translation. The Hebrew literally says he obtained “*shedah weshedoth*.” That’s the singular and the plural of the word *shedah*. Using the singular and the plural was emphatic, it was a strong way of saying, “more than you can even imagine.” Okay, but more of what. Well, given that the English translated it “a harem” you probably figured out it referred to women. That’s true, but the words he used give a little more color to the subject. There was a Hebrew word for “woman” and it wasn’t used here. This word originally meant “breast.” In other words, Solomon was all about the body. So now you get the rather sexist idea of what Solomon was driving at here. It was more sexy women to have sex with that you can even imagine. That’s what he meant by the delights of a man’s heart.

Solomon had what people sometimes dream of, life without limits. Imagine being able to have and to do whatever your heart desires. Take what you want, go wherever you want, do whatever you want and nothing can stop you. Wouldn’t that be the life we all want? Here’s how Solomon summed up his pursuit of life through pleasure, “Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.” It was all futile and pointless. Sure a vacation in Bora Bora was better than a week in Yuma, and a mansion was more comfortable than a shack, but none of it meant anything. It all left him hollow. It was empty. You can imagine. Night after night partying, including an endless parade of one night stands with women. After a while it all just got old. This is why he said in verse 17 “I hated life.” That’s where the endless pursuit of pleasure leads.

If you make the focus of your life the finer things, the things you think will give you pleasure, whether that be listening to the fat lady sing at the opera or drinking beer while you float down a river on an inner tube listening to country music, you will find it will leave you hollow at some point. It will amount to a big fat zero, and so will your life.

The Teacher also tried the intellectual path. In 2:12 he said, “I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom.” He found out that being wise is better than being an idiot. In 2:14 he said, “The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness.” But this wasn’t an answer either. In 2:15 the wise Teacher said, “The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?” What good does it do to be wise if you end up the same as a fool?

Furthermore, as 2:16 says, “The wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered.” I didn’t know my grandfathers all that well. I can’t tell you whether they were wise or foolish. To me, both of them were just Grampa. But take it a step further. I never even met my great grandfathers. I can’t even tell you what their names were. Were they wise, or were they foolish? Who cares? It doesn’t matter. They are gone, and honestly, they forgotten. So is it important that I be wise rather than foolish? Well, it will make life easier, maybe better for me. Maybe I will even live longer. But in the large scope of things, will it matter in the long run? No, the fact is no one will remember.

In 2:17 the Teacher addressed one more thing. Maybe my life’s work will amount to something and that will be important. Yes, maybe I can do something that will make a lasting mark. Maybe what I do will have some meaning because it will live beyond me. You should know that Cesar Hidalgo, director of the Collective Learning Group at MIT, has recently published the results of a study done by him and his fellow data scientists. The question they asked was how long are people and things remembered? Using data mining and mathematical models they arrived at the conclusion that they are remembered between 5 and 30 years. Yes, it’s possible that what you do will be remembered after you’re gone, but not for long.

People in our culture try to find some validation of themselves and some meaning for their lives in their work. Perhaps you’ve been hearing about what’s being called the Great Resignation. People are quitting jobs in record numbers right now. There are a number of reasons for this. But Liz Fosslien, author and head of content at Humu, a human resource company, says that a key component in people’s dissatisfaction is they lack a sense of meaning in their work. The bad news is no matter what you do, no matter how meaningful you think it might be, at some point you are going to realize it was all futile! It doesn’t amount to anything that is truly lasting.

Markus Persson created the video game Minecraft. When Microsoft bought it his net worth soared to $1.3 billion. He promptly bought a ridiculous mansion in Beverly Hills for $70 million. He is an atheist, living “under the sun.” Back in the early morning hours of an August day in 2015 he posted a series of tweets that captured how it was working out for him. He said, “The problem with getting everything is you run out of reasons to keep trying.” A bit later he said, “Hanging out in Ibiza with friends and partying with famous people, able to do whatever I want, and I’ve never felt more isolated.” Maybe he should have read Ecclesiastes.

THERE IS AN ANSWER FOR LIFE

So far this sounds like a hopeless analysis of life. It is all futile, no matter what you do. Nothing lasts, nothing means anything, then you die. Gee, thanks for the encouragement. But in 2:24 there is a significant turn in this discussion. It turns out there is hope. In the closing verses of chapter 2 there are several crucial truths.

**God wants us to have lives that are full and meaningful.**

Comedian Louis C. K. Said in an interview with Conan O’Brien, “Underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty, forever empty. That knowledge that it’s all for nothing and you’re alone.” He said at times when you’re not doing anything, “It starts to visit you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it.” This is not what God wants for us.

In verse 26 the Teacher talks about God giving us wisdom, knowledge and happiness. The Hebrew word translated “happiness” often means “joy.” In verse 24 he talked about us having satisfaction. Why are these first two chapters in God’s message to us? It is because he knows how we think. It is human to think that if we can just have enough good stuff, enough money, enough pleasure, enough fun, or if we can be smart enough, wise enough, or if we can just do something that is noteworthy, important, meaningful, then we will be happy with our lives. These verses are intended to shock us awake. They are like dumping a bucket of ice water on us when we have fallen asleep. They tell us the way we think won’t work. It is all chasing after the wind. It will all end up being futile and empty.

God tells us that because he doesn’t want that for us. He wants us to know there is hope. There is a way to live the ends up being joyful, fulfilling and meaningful. He wants us to have satisfaction. It is common to think that going God’s way is going to limit our fun. We will have to endure the hard life doing what God wants and having no fun. This passage says we couldn’t be more wrong. God wants us to have lives filled with joy, with happiness! He wants us to have full, meaningful, joyful lives. That is what this book is about.

**God must be at the center for us to have that kind of life**

Life actually is fairly simple. It ultimately boils down to one question. What is life about? There are only two possible answers to the question. Answer A is it is about me. Answer B is it is about God. These first chapters of this book describe what happens when we choose A as our answer. Our entire lives become chasing after wind. It will never make sense and it will end up being futile.

There is a point in verse 24 that is crucial. It sounds like the Teacher is telling us to just be content with what we have and are doing, and that’s the best we can do in life. But how do you do that when the whole endeavor is futile? Be like the absurdist and just accept your pointless fate? The problem with that is it doesn’t work. It destroys our souls and leaves us with unbearable pain. There is no peace and no joy in that. There is no satisfaction. But God has made us for satisfaction and joy.

There is a fine point of Hebrew grammar here that I believe changes this statement completely. Few, if any, translators pick up on this, but I still think it is true. The Hebrew literally reads “Not the good in man that he should eat and drink and cause his soul to see good in his labor.” I think he’s saying the opposite of what the English translation sounds like. I think he’s saying it would be great if we could just eat and drink and be content and happy with our work, but that good is not in us. We can’t do it. So, he says, the ability to do that is from the hand of God. If we aren’t connected to God and receiving that from him, we won’t ever have it.

Answer B, making life about God, is not natural for humans. It feels hard, impossible to remember and live by, but it is the only way we will be able to live wisely, ending up with lives that mean something, and that have joy. Many years ago some friends of ours told us about a day they had a pretty good laugh together. The husband was driving as they went by some fields in the area here when the wife said, “Isn’t it interesting how those cows are all lying down separate from each other, each one by itself a distance apart?” The husband didn’t know what she was talking about. He didn’t see any cows. He said, “What cows are you talking about?” She said, “Those right there,” pointing to the field they were driving by. Then he knew what was happening. He said, “Those aren’t cows. They are brown trash bags.” His wife was very nearsighted. She just couldn’t handle wearing contacts, but she didn’t like to wear glasses either, so she often went through life seeing a very blurry world. In this case her blurry vision turned bags into cows.

As a near sighted person myself, I can testify what a difference it makes when I put on my contact lenses or my glasses. Suddenly I can see what is actually there. Solomon tells us that having God at the center is the lens through which we must view life if we want to see what is really there. If we choose answer A and go through life as humans normally do, we will forever be mistaking trash bags for cows and ending up confused and frustrated by why life is so empty.

Think of life as being like drinking a milkshake through a straw. This past summer Laurie and I got peach milkshakes from Chick-Fil-A. At one point a small chunk of peach got stuck in my straw. It blocked the flow and I couldn’t get any of the shake. Having God at the center is like the straw. If you don’t have God at the center it’s like having no straw, or having the straw blocked. You will get no life. When you make life about pleasure, achievement, money, status for you, it’s like having that chunk block the flow. The deal here is God is the source of all life. Cut him out of the picture and you cut off the very life you are trying to have.

The ability to have a life that is meaningful and full, to actually have joy no matter where we are in life, is a gift we receive from God. If we don’t have God at the center, we won’t receive that gift. But if we do, this means that we can truly enjoy whatever we have. It is a gift from God. This day is a gift from him so we can enjoy it to its full. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:4, “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” All the things the Teacher found to be empty, futile and caused him to hate life, we can actually enjoy to the full because they are gifts from God.

**Living to please God is how we make him the center**

Verse 26 says, “To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.” The key to finding joy and meaningful and fullness in life is living each day to please God. Wisdom is the ability to choose the best thing to do and the best way of doing it. The problem for us is we don’t know what the best thing to do is. We can only dimly see what is really going on and we don’t know all the long term consequences of our choices. The law of unintended consequences shows up all too often.

We can’t see what is the best thing to do because we don’t know what it is going to lead to. In the midst of the fray of life it is hard to make sense of what is going on and make the right choices. No doubt you have seen football games on television and have seen a coach on the sideline, holding his list of plays, and calling the plays in to his offense. What else is true of him? He is wearing a headset. Why is that? He is talking to another coach who is up in the press box above. Why is he doing that? Have you ever been on the sideline of a major college or pro football game? Do you know what you see from the sideline? You see chaos. You get a visceral feel for the speed and power of the game. You get a general sense of what is going on. But you really can’t tell exactly what is happening and why. A coach has to be up above the field, some distance removed from the action, to understand what is really happening. He enables the coach on the field to make wise decisions he would not otherwise be able to make.

Pleasing God, doing his will, obeying his instruction, is *always* the right thing to do. It will always have the right consequences, because it will lead to his will being done. Pleasing God is like listening to the coach up in the press box who sees what is really happening. So we put those headphones on and do what he tells us to do.