

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

Exploring My Strange Bible Podcast

Podcast Date

[45:15]

Speakers in the audio file:

Tim Mackie

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

Tim Mackie:

Hey everybody. I'm Tim Mackie and this is my Podcast, Exploring My Strange Bible.

I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that JESUS of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have.

On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 10 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I have been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith and I hope this could be helpful for you too.

I also help start this thing called The Bible Project. We make animated videos and podcasts about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find those resources at the BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

All right, this is part two of a three-part teaching series on the book of Ecclesiastes where I'm packing the main themes in the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes. And in this teaching, we build off of the first one which was exploring the core metaphor, the teacher of the skeptic in this book. Has about all of life that all of life is hevel, that is unpredictable, enigma, absurd, ungraspable. And so in the light of that fact, the teacher takes a pretty dim view of you being able to get really a lot of leverage on controlling your life or even understanding its meaning which is not something you expect to hear from the Bible, but there it is.

So, how do you respond to this really sobering truth? And that's what we explore in this teaching. There's a handful of passages in the Book of Ecclesiastes where the teaching voice says that embracing the fact that life is hevel which again listen to episode one to understand what that means, in line to that fact, how then do you live? And what the teacher says is actually embracing life as hevel is a strange gift. It's a gift that can enrich your life, rather than

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

diminish it. How and what does that mean? That's what we're going to explore in this teaching, so let's dive in.

We're in week two then of this Ecclesiastes series and Josh was going to work through chapter two tonight because I'm going to start at the end of chapter two next week, but instead I'm doing that tonight, so can you cut me some grace? Yes, you can. You can totally cut me at least that much grace.

So, Ecclesiastes chapters two, dive right in. I don't have any pipes or other props tonight, sorry, but this book, this book is just so great, I'm really enjoying studying and being in Ecclesiastes. By the way, you can read it in about an hour which means as we're in this over the next month and a half, you can at least read this thing at least four or five times through, and I'd really encourage you to do it. It's one of those books that actually repays you more and more and more the more time you spend in it because you finish it the first time or second time you ever read it and you're like, "What on earth is this about?" So, you got to keep going for it, but it pays and continues to repay to spend more time in it.

All right. Let's just kind of reintroduce ourselves. Chapter 1:1: "This book contains the words of the Teacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem." And what are his words? His words are "Meaningless! Meaningless," says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all of their labors at which they toil under the sun?" So, we explored last week just this basic idea. The core, main idea of the words of this Teacher remains anonymous to us. We're invited to come to see the life from this Solomon-like Teacher's perspective and some of you have not meaningless, but what in your translation? Vanity. Others of you have meaningless, some of you might have something like vapor something. This is the key to the whole book, is in understanding these key words right here; meaningless or vanity or whatever about life here under the sun. If you grasp these ideas, you've got the basic idea of the book.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

Now, is meaningless the best possible English word to capture the author's saying here? It's as good as any. Vanity is another good one, it's decent, but just like in any language, no language has one for one correspondence between ideas and words in one language and ideas and words in another. So we're kind of--we're doing our best here, but how many of you remember the Hebrew word that's used here? Hevel. Hevel is used over 40 times here in the Book of Ecclesiastes--

[05:00]

--and it means literally smoke, smoke, or vapor. "Vapor" says the Teacher. Everything is like smoke and vapor. And maybe he used this system in a couple different things, so let's get the slide up here.

So sometimes, we'll use this word to mean life or something in life. It's fleeting, it's short, it's temporary, it's here today, gone tomorrow, but the Teacher's also going to use this concept of hevel to describe how unpredictable life is. It's like it's ungraspable. We can all see that it's there, and it seems like life makes sense, but when I actually start the business of living and trying to get my hands around it and make it work, things don't go the way that I wanted them to go. And so, what he's not saying is here I am, I surveyed everything, life has no meaning, whatsoever. That's not what he meant, he really believes life's totally has meaning and that meaning is bound up in God's purposes and history, and that God is going to wrap up history with a final act of setting everything right. He says that multiple times in the book. What he doesn't think is that you and I are always capable of understanding what that meaning might be, in my life circumstances. I may not be able to make sense out of life and to get my hands around it, but that doesn't mean life has no sense, it just means I'm a small puny human and that I'm fragile right, and I don't understand the sense that life has all of the time. Doesn't mean has no sense.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

Here's what we're going to do, we're going to explore just one passage, but we're actually going to look at a theme through the book. Because this is a conclusion that the author's going to draw, chapter two which Josh will now be doing next week, he's going to talk about how he just like immerse himself fully in the pursuit of pleasure, and wine, women, and song, and making gardens, and so on. And he comes at the end of it and he finds that it was all a great weekend, but Monday eventually came. "It's hevel. Hevel!" he says. Party all you want, eventually, the weekend's over, and this is like fleeting, and you'll find that you haven't really accomplished anything with your weekend wiring. Is that a verb? Weekend wiring? I just made that one.

And so, he has this real kind of dower, down sounding tones throughout the book. Hevel, hevel, everything's hevel. Everything's hevel. Everything you could imagine, everything you try, everything you're going to do, but then at the end of chapter two, there's a huge shifting of the gears. Look at the end of chapter two with me. Chapter 2:24: He says, "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink, and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see is from the hand of God because without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" So, we we're going like down this really steep hill, everything is hevel, everything you try and grasp, but the meaning of life you can't do it. Stuff happens in your life you can't control. You try and pursue things that you feel are going to give you purpose and meaning, and then they don't. Hevel. So, here's what I recommend, enjoy life, like have a good meal, enjoy a good drink, and enjoy your work because that's the gift of God. Which is it? Is life hevel or is life an enjoyable gift from God?

Turn the page, you go to chapter three with me. Go to Chapter 3:9, "What do workers gain from their toil?" I mean, I've seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He's made everything beautiful in its time, I'm just referring back to the famous song that goes a time for this, a time for that, right. You know this? You know what I'm talking about? I'm not going to try and sing it, but there's that song.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

God is orchestrating history and there's a time for all of these different events in life and God has set eternity in the human heart. You maybe have heard that verse from Ecclesiastes before, but he doesn't see that as necessarily a good thing because God has put in us a sense that history should have meaning, and that this is all going somewhere and that there should be some transcendent meaning and sense out of all of this, but none of us can fathom what God is doing from beginning to the end. I mean, I sure can't figure it out all the time, can you? So, what should we do in line to the fact that we know there should be some bigger picture to our lives, and to history, but none of us can figure out what it is.

Here's what he says, verse 12, "I know there's nothing better for people than be happy. Be happy. Do good while you're alive. Each of them should eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil—this is the gift." Go down to verse 20, "Everybody's going to the same place. We all came from the dust, we're all going back to the dust." I mean, who knows if the human spirit rises upward or if the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth? Animals, human, we're all going to disintegrate back into dust again, so how then should we live? So there's nothing better that a person can do than to enjoy their work because that's their life.

[10:00]

I mean, who can bring them to see what will happen after them? You're not in control of your life, you know you're going back to dust again, so at least have a good time.

So, go to Chapter five, it gets better. Oh, it gets better. Chapter 5:15: "Everybody comes naked from their mother's womb and as everyone comes, so they depart." They can't take anything from their toil that they can carry in their hands, and this too, this is a grievous evil. As everybody comes, so they depart. I mean, what do we gain since all of our eyes were working, working, working and we're toiling for what? For the wind, I guess. And all of the days are days we eat in darkness with great frustration, and affliction, and

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

anger. So here's what I observed to be good; it's good for a person to eat, to drink, to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life that God has given them. This is their lot. even more so, when God gives someone wealth or possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil, this is God's gift. They seldom reflect on the days of their life because God keeps them occupied with gladness of wheat. So, is life meaningless and hevel and chasing after wind or is life a gift of God that's meant to be enjoyed? Which is it? What's wrong with this guy?

Go to Chapter 8:14. This one's really good. "Here's something hevel that occurs on the earth." Here's something that seems to make no sense. "The righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve." This, I say is hevel, and do you agree? This is totally hevel. This is an enigma, it's a paradox. How does this make sense? I don't know. "So here's what I commend, the enjoyment of life because there's nothing better for a person to do under the sun than to eat and to drink and be glad, then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of their life that God has given them under the sun."

Chapter 9:3: "Here's another evil that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes everybody. The hearts of people, moreover, they're full of evil and there's madness in our hearts while we live, and afterward, they all join the dead." So, let's view life here under the sun. So, verse 7: "So, go, go eat a good meal with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart. God has approved of what you do." In other words, it seems that God takes special pleasure when people enjoy the goodness of life. "Always wear white and anoint your head with oil." Which, I think, essentially what he means is don't dress like a funeral mourner and you put some product in your hair. You know, I mean like look presentable, right? Don't be like dower and be like the Portland depressed person with like messy hair and always wearing a black overcoat or something, don't be that person. So, like look presentable. Look like you're enjoying

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

life and actually go enjoy it, right? "Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this meaningless life--" And here I think it actually means hevel is like temporary of your temporary life, "--that God has given you under the sun. All of your temporary vapor-like days. This is your lot in life and your toilsome labor here under the sun."

Last one, chapter 11:7: "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a person may live, men enjoy them. All of them. But you should remember the days of darkness, for there's going to be a whole bunch of those. And everything to come is like a puff of smoke. So, when you're young, be happy while you're young. Let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see--" and some of us are like sweet, I won't remember that verse in the Bible, right. But he qualifies he's talking about enjoying every good thing that life has to offer, but he said, but remember that for all of these things, God's going to hold you accountable, right? So, your enjoyment needs to be done in the fear of the Lord, and honoring Him. So, he says, "Banish anxiety from your heart and cast off troubles from your body, for youth and vigor are here today, gone. So enjoy them while you have them and remember your creator in the days of your youth.

Do you see a pattern here? We just walked from one end of the book to the other. Did you see the pattern? Hevel, smoke, vapor, death, you're all going to die, we're all crazy, we're all going to die. So, enjoy life, right? Sit back, have some dinner with your friends, if you find a life companion,

[15:00]

that's awesome, just enjoy, enjoy the days that you have because the days of darkness are coming and hevel, and smoke, and it's going to be horrible, and you're going to be old and decrepted, and

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

you're not going to know what to do, so enjoy life because that's coming. You see this here, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. So we read this and we think this guy's crazy, like there's two people in his head or something, like what's wrong with this person? What's happening here is that somehow, the way that we see the world, this is an either or. Either, life, I can't make sense of life all of the time, I don't always know what's going on. I'm in a perpetual state of bewilderment about my life, so I'm going to mop around and do nothing, whatever, it's all—it seems meaningless to me or we have this like starry-eyed optimism and like God is going to make on my wildest dreams come true, something like that, none of us actually say that, but many of us actually live like that, right because we're very disappointed when God doesn't underwrite our dreams. And so, we begin to resent God and some, but at least we're going to go pursue and follow whatever is in your heart, all this seeing life through rose colored glasses. What the Teacher's going to say is actually this is not an either or. See we see failures in life and disappointment as obstacles in my way to a life of joy and fulfillment. And he's just going to turn that right on its head, he's going to say, "Actually, it's life failures and disappointments that are the key to embracing a life of true joy here under the sun."

We see failure as an obstacle. The Teacher sees life's failures as an opportunity to embrace true joy. Why? Let me frame this in a few different ways. So, I live by Franklin High School, a path of 50th and Division, and there's public park by the tennis courts of the high school which is kind of weird because it's a high school, but it's a park for all the little kids of the neighborhood which means that it's one of those parks that's perpetually filled with high school students like just sitting around and all this stuff, that's filled with little kids. You know what I mean, like one of those kind of parks? Whatever.

So, we live on a number of blocks away, and so, I often take my son Roman to the park to go play there. So, he's a year and a half and his whole life is climbing, and slobbering, and these kinds of things all over the park. We're going to the park one day, it's a school day

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

and the school's letting out, it's like 3 P.M. And so, we're going down the sidewalk, pushing Roman's stroller, and so, there's a few things. First of all, in the parking lot, I observed a small group of skateboarders, right, home team. So, I'm automatically, I like these guys, and then like oh, cool, and they're like skate around the parking lot. And then, I can see they're getting ready to leave the parking lot. So they begin to skate out and it's like the parking lot and the driveway crosses the sidewalk out into the street. At the same time, this little group, three or four guys is getting ready to go, there's a group of girls like coming towards me on the sidewalk on the other side of the driveway. I can see the look in their eye and I can see what's going to happen here, so, like they're going to race out of the parking lot. One of these guys, they're like want to do something cool to impress the girls. They go out into the street. And I'm watching this with pleasure, like what's going to happen here? And so, Portland here city sidewalk, grass patch, and then the street.

And so, one of these guys he starts pushing pretty hard because he wants to come out of angle and like jump over the grass patch into the street right in front of the girls. That's totally admirable. And so, we're watching, we're just a number of yards away as we go. And so, this guy comes and he doesn't make it. He doesn't jump far enough, and so, he's guying and then he lands his back wheels on the grass, so he just sticks and then he pitches right into the street, and it's like the shoulder grind. And he's got his backpack on and he does this roll and what have you. And so, the girls now, they're not impressed, obviously, they're laughing or some are horrified and so on. I felt so horrible for what's happening inside of me. On the outside, I went like oh, oh, but on the inside, I had this feeling of like oh, that was so awesome. I watched this happen with a little bit of relish inside of me mostly because I resonated with this guy's experience because precisely the same thing happened to me in high school a number of times. You're trying a trick in front of the girls that you like and then you fall in front of them.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

So, I was here at the park or whatever and we're hanging out and I was really kind of working this over because it hurts to fall like that. And then, I was like "What's wrong with me?" Here's a moment. This guy's trying to make something happen in life, you know what I mean? Who knows his story, and this is his chance, you know what I'm saying. Make himself appear like he's somebody in front of these girls. We have a name for these moments in our culture. We call them fail moments, right? There's whole like websites dedicated to these. The fail blogs and epic fails, and so on. Someone intending to make life go a certain way, usually to make themselves look better and then they humiliate themselves in some horrible accidents or something like that. And sometimes, they're really like someone gets hurt, but you're laughing, you know what I mean?

[20:00]

We're laughing at this and we make whole websites out of this. Why is that? And there's a couple of reasons. One is, it's a form of psychological displacement because what we're really thinking is that could be me, I'm sure glad it's not, right. So, that's one thing we're thinking, but in another, it just exposes this irony in life. We have these ideas about how life ought to go, and we certainly have ideas about how my life ought to go, and the path and the course that my life is going to take. And then things happen in life that you simply cannot control whether it's something serious like a tragedy or something more silly like you fall on your skateboard, right.

There's a whole spectrum in between of things that happen to us. I had this plan, I had this career, I'm in this relationship, here we go. And then, we have these epic fail moments in our lives, and we view those as obstacles in life. And the Teacher says, "No, actually that moment in that kid's life could be the best thing that ever happened to him." It could do two things. It could strip him of the illusion that he's actually in control of his life and that he can actually make things happen the way that he wants them to. And the sooner we are stripped to that illusion, in the Teacher's opinion, the better

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

because the more we're trying to hold on and control the outcomes of the events in our lives, the more we're going to be so myopically focused on the control of making things go a certain way that we're actually blind to the everyday moments of joy that present themselves to us. So we need to be stripped of that illusion. We also need to be stripped of the illusion that if I could control my life to go to the way that I want it to and get the outcomes that I actually want to achieve, then I'd finally like take a break, and rest, and have satisfaction, and fulfillment, and joy in life. And the Teacher is just going deconstructing all of that too because he sees this little moments of joy in life like a meal or a drink or a walk with a friend, he sees them as merely pointers to some greater future joy to a degree that we have never experienced and won't experience here under the sun.

Chapter 5, we read this, verse 16: "As everyone comes, so they depart, what do they gain since they toil for the wind?" Here we are working. Work is what most of us do with most of the hours of our days. And so, he comes along and he says, work it's like a grievous evil, at least the way we experience work or different jobs at certain times in our lives because we're working and we often we don't know what for or maybe we have some goals that we're moving towards or something, but something's going to happen to those, and then a life of change, hevel will happen, and then all of a sudden, like the thing that you're working for it disappears or she moves away or something, whatever. And then, where are you? It's just like we're chasing after the wind. Not only that, work is stressful. And so, all the days that we're working, we're eating during our lunch breaks in darkness. There's one job that I had, the worst, like the most depressing lunch room in the whole world. Anyhow, so, "-- darkness, great frustration, affliction, and anger." That's toil.

So, this is what I've observed to be good. It's good for a person to eat, to drink, and to find satisfaction in what? In your work. Somehow, there's two ways to approach any of life's same circumstances. If I'm a person that's clamoring for a certain outcome

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

in my life, what the Teacher is saying is, what's in store for me at work is frustration, anxiety, affliction, and anger, and sitting in dark lunch rooms, right. But if my beginning point is not working so that I can achieve my plans and certain outcomes or something, and that's what this is all about. If my beginning point is I release control of the outcomes of my life, then I'm free to actually begin in enjoying simple moments like having a good meal and having a drink with some friends, and actually seeing the funny ironic things that happen in this workplace that I used to think was horrible, but once I got over my control, I can actually, there's some beauty and goodness in these people that I'm around here. It's the same, exact circumstances from two different points of view. And actually what he's saying is being frustrated with your work and finding that it's hevel is the key to finding joy. I have to look at my notes.

So, what he's saying is that my ability to enjoy the goodness of simple, everyday events like work or eating in the lunch room, he says it's directly tied to my ability to see that I have no control over my life. And some of you might be like, "What? That doesn't make any sense to me." And that could be a sign. I still actually working under the illusion that I have control over my life,

[25:00]

but there's some of us who had been in a whole bunch of life's circumstances where time, where age begin to wisen you to the fact that you can have the most noble intentions, and plans, and goals, life is almost never going to turn out exactly the way that you planned it. And that doesn't mean life is going to be horrible. It just means it's almost never going to work out exactly the way that you planned it. And for some people, that's the worst possible thing that could ever happen, but for some people, freedom.

So, as I've been sitting in this truth, I thought I would have another week to sit in it, but to be honest with you, this truth in the Book of Ecclesiastes is taking me to school personally right now in two different ways, and the first one is right here, like this thing that we

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

call Door of Hope. And Josh and I talk all the time about this. You may or may not be aware of this, but for people who start new churches or for leaders of churches, there's just like a whole industry of like books, and DVDs, and conferences of like make, take your church to the next level, or whatever like lead with power and vision. And a lot of it's really helpful, practical, and great, it's really great. Practical stuff or leading, starting churches, and so on. As I've kind of been exposed to some of that, there's a strange seduction that begins to take place there, for church leaders that lead especially if it's a person whose personality is wired towards outcomes, and goals, and making things happen in life, right?

And I've had this happen to friends of mine who are pastors and I can observe the tremors of it even in my own heart sometimes, right. We're going to make this, we're going to care about the poor more, we're going to make an impact in this city, making things happen, we're going to have 80 small groups by the end of the year. You know what I mean? We have these outcomes and goals and then, you realize like this is the church, and what's the church? This is not a building, not once in the Bible is the church connected with a building, the church is people. Our people and outcome are people of goal. Can you just make people do what you want them to do? Of course not, of course not.

So, there's two ways you can go down that road as the leader of a church then. You can begin to see the people on your church as a means to an end, I'm going to take this church somewhere, here's the power to do it, you know. And then, when that doesn't work out, then you get pastors and leaders who've become like resentful of the people that they're called to shepherd because they're not responding the way that I think the church opt to, you know what I'm saying? And the very thing that ought to bring joy, people is the very thing that brings me grief and frustration because my starting point was, I want to make things happen and we're going to place somewhere.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

My starting point is I can't make Door of Hope do one thing. I have no idea what's going to happen two years from now, a Door of Hope. I can't control the outcomes; I can't make people do anything at all. I can kind of sometimes control this person right here, right, and not always in the ways that I would like, but I think I'm getting better at it as I follow Jesus longer, but be in control of this person, I'm responsible for this. And so, what I can do is release the outcome to God. That's actually not my burden to bury. It might bury me, but it's not my burden to carry, right? Like the weight of all of our collective destiny and so what we're going to do in this--like how presumptuous of me to think that I should carry that or Josh or the elders, no, we're people. Each of us has roles and responsibilities. If my starting point, we're going to make things happen, destined for disappointment, and bitterness, anger, frustration, affliction, right. But if my starting point is I have no idea where these things come from, and I can't control it, I begin by acknowledging my powerlessness, I release the results to God, and according to the Teacher, now I'm ready to dive in to work and to maybe actually have a good time while I'm at it, to see moments of joy because I'm not so obsessed with obtaining a certain outcome. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes is taking me to school in this area. Taking me to school also as a father, and as a parent, and if you're parents, you will resonate with this, if you had a parent, you'll resonate with this, and I think that's everybody in the room, to some degree.

So, one thing, so I have this one-and-a-half-year-old, Roman, as I mentioned, and he's a little cave man right now. He slobbers and grunts, or whatever, he can't quite communicate it, he's pointing everywhere, he's like knocking stuff over, he's always in to everything, and he's happy about it like this is just kind of what he does. And so, I have two responsibilities as a parent. One, I need to help civilize him to a land of civilized people.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

We're reading this parenting book right now it says parents are ambassadors of the civilized world to these little cave people helping them learn that grunting and slobbering, and so on is not okay all of the time. That's one of my roles, is to guide and to train him, right? That's very important that I do that, but so quickly and easily I can slip from guidance and training into control mode with Roman.

And so, he's like particularly angry one day which sometimes that happens or whatever, and so, I'll spend the whole, it's like a day off and I'm with him, the whole afternoon or something. I'll spend the whole day just stressing about why is he keep doing that? Like I just told him not to go towards the plug five different—he's going again, here he is little caveman. And like oh, don't get into that, and if we're in a public place, it's even worse because I'm hyper aware of his caveman-like qualities because he's going around, running in into stuff, like oh, sorry, excuse me, sorry, and I get into this hyper-control mode of like no, he needs to not do that, and sometimes it's necessary, sometimes it's probably unnecessary. And a whole afternoon has gone by and what have I not done once? Enjoyed being with him because I'm so stressed, I need to control what this kid does. Yeah, I need to guide him, I need to train him, but especially as Roman becomes an adult, I'll always have a degree of influence in his life, but I should never live under the illusion that I can control him. He's a person. And so, we have these relationships in our lives, and we want there to be a certain outcome where is this relationship going, why does my mom always act that way, and we want to control the outcomes of these people, these relationships.

And it seems to me that what the Teacher is saying is as if my starting point is why doesn't this person do what I want them to do? You're just set up for darkness, frustration, affliction, and anger according to chapter 5:17. If my beginning point is I have not control over this person, I might have a degree of influence, I might have a degree of training or guidance in their life, but if Roman grows up, and he loves Justine Bieber and going to the mall, I just

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

have to deal with that. And so, I'll weep in my heart or whatever, but that's whatever, that's okay, like he's a person, I shouldn't carry the burden of thinking I'm responsible for his destiny. I'm responsible for a big part of his destiny, more than most other people because he's my son. This kid was given to me as a gift. He's not mine, he's on loan to me for a while, and I can influence, I have a role. What it'll frees me to do is to just whole-heartedly dive-in to being a dad, and to have open eyes to these moments of joy when he says really silly things. He said shoe today for the first time. He looked at my shoe, like shoe and he tried to stand in my shoes, these beautiful little moment, and so on because I was in stress-control mode because I was stressed about preparing a sermon, right? So, that's what he's saying. The same exact events: work, life, relationships, he's going to go through all of them. They'll either be hell to you or taste of heaven. It depends on whether you're willing to give up control of where this train is going.

Failures, disappointments, frustrations, teacher's mind are the way into enjoyment in life. There's a second illusion, the final illusion he's trying to strip us of. Chapter 2:20, we're going to come back to this passage. We're going to spend the whole Sunday talking about the meaning of work in Ecclesiastes verse 20. He says, "So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun." Because look, a person may work and labor with wisdom, and knowledge, and skill, but then you got to leave it all to somebody else, who hasn't worked for it? It's hevel. It's a great misfortune. What do you get for all the work and the anxiety and the striving that we're working for here under the sun? All their days' work is like grief and pain. This is big. What do you get out of this? You work so hard, what do you get?

And so, in the Teacher's mind, we're all here working and striving, we're like the skateboarder kid, we're trying to make things happen here. And for all kinds of different reasons. We're trying to get something out of life. We're trying to get admiration, we're trying to adjust our existence in the universe, trying to make ourselves feel

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

competent in the eyes of others, in our own eyes, we're trying to get joy. But somehow, paradoxically, he's saying joy never comes if you're trying to work for it. If you're trying to do all these life accomplishments, you might get little bits of joy, but eventually, you'll see that they're hevel too--

35:00]

--because the weekend always ends and Monday always comes.

And so, somehow, he wants us to see that even--like the best that we can get are moments of verse 24: "having a meal, having a drink with friends, seeing satisfaction in our work, joy." He's trying to strip us of the illusion that even under the best of circumstances, we're going to find ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment. We want to control life because we think I got 70 years, and even if I say I'm a Christian, and I say I believe in Jesus' return and the new creation, virtually, none of us actually live like that, we actually live as if all we got is our 70 years. And so, we control these 70 years because we want to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. And what he's essentially saying is even the maximum amount of pleasure that you can get for yourself out of controlling your life here, I mean, it's actually quite minimal, actually quite hevel, Monday always comes. And the capital M Monday, the grave, it's coming and none of us can stop, and it reduces all of our pleasure or work, hevel. Why does he commend having a meal, and a drink with friends, and trying to find the joy in little moments in life? This struck me because every single passage that we read about being happy and enjoy involve two activities: eating and drinking, right, having feasting, feasting. Why did he choose that image? Why did he use that image? Feasting is one of the most common biblical motifs and themes from cover to cover to describe what human beings are made for.

So, eating and drinking is actually what we're doing, we're engaging in mystery. Every time you open your mouth and eat something, you're acknowledging your dependence on something outside of yourself, every time you open your mouth and eat. Did you produce

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

all of the food that you ate? No. And McDonald's sure didn't. You know what I'm saying? Like, they got it from somewhere else, who knows where that came from, right? But so, every time we open our mouths to eat, we're acknowledging my fragility, my smallness, my dependence on larger forces at work outside myself. And so, when we eat, we're just announcing our dependence on others. And when we eat, typically it's with others. I'm announcing that I need others in my life and relationships sort of feasting. So, feasting is what God and humans were doing in the garden and so on, all the fruit trees that God made, and there's God and humans in the garden who's great. Feasting is the image of how Israel was to enjoy the Promised Land. Every seven days they're supposed to have a big feast and rest from their labor. Feasting is what Jesus did with all of the wrong people, right. These nice religious leaders, eating and drinking to announce and celebrate the fact that God's Kingdom has finally arrived in Jesus and He's come to rescue this world, and feasting is the last moment of the story in Revelation as heaven and earth come together.

So, the author of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher, this is not incidental that he chooses--feasting is something we do every day where we have a chance to make the relentless movement of time, to make it stop for a second, and we pause with others, and I remember my smallness, my dependence, my need for other people. And in theory, you're hungry, you eat, and then what do you experience afterwards? Satisfaction. Not permanent, it's a short momentary state of just pause, and rest with people, food, all this well. Feasting is the image of Shalom and well-being in the scriptures, but the moment that we see like big Mac as like the thing in life, none of us, but that was ridiculous, that was ridiculous. We've never see that, but the moment that we look for feasting, moments of feasting, we try to manufacture those moments of joy and feasting and so on, I mean, Portland, holy cow you could feast every night of the week. You know what I mean? I can do plays, and it might be fun for a

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

while, but Monday always comes, and capital M Monday's always going to come. It's hevel. It's hevel.

And so, feasting, I think, in the Teacher's view is a forward pointing symbol. So, what he says in the last words of the book, "Fear God for He's going to hold all of us accountable, He's going to bring a moment of justice to set right all wrongs and restore His world." And when we feast, we pause for a moment, we experience a momentary sense of shalom with those around us. In theory, we remind ourselves that all of my experiences of joy in life, they're just little breadcrumbs that I'm following in a trail that lead to great wedding feast--

[40:00]

--of the Lamb and reuniting of Heaven and Earth. And when I mistake the small momentary joys of day to day life for the real thing, it's hevel because Monday always comes. Monday always comes.

So, it seems to me that the Teacher is not schizophrenic. Death, death, hevel, hevel, so enjoy life. What he's actually saying is that recognizing my lack of control, and recognizing that my life here under the sun in a broken compromised world, I shouldn't expect this to be heaven on earth. Why should we expect that? It's clearly not. It's a world compromised by evil and by sin, and selfishness, and arms stupidity. Why would we think for a moment? Think for a moment that we can find ultimate shalom here in these 70 years, but we do all the time.

Let me close with some words from Blaise Pascal. He was a 17th Century French, Christian philosopher. He describes the restlessness inside of us that causes us to believe in the illusion that we can control our lives and that we can find joy here. He put it this way. He says, "We're never satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming as if we can hasten its course or we recall the past to stop its too rapid flight. We are so unwise that we

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

wander about in times which are not ours and we don't think of the only one which belongs to us. We are so idle that we dream of those times which are no more and we thoughtlessly overlook the only one that exist, it's because the present is generally painful to us. We conceal it from our side because it troubles us and if it happens to be delightful to us, we regret to see it pass away.

We try to sustain it by the future and think of controlling matters which are not in our power, and so, we're preparing for a time which we have no certainty of reject." One of us, let's examine his thoughts and he will find them all occupied with the past or the future. We scarcely ever think of the present and if we think of it, it is only to take white from it to arrange the future." Isn't this great? It's so depressing, but enlightening at the same time, right? So, the past and the present are our means. And so, we never live. And as we're always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so. That's precisely what the teacher is saying.

The moment I give up the illusion of control, and the illusion that life here under the sun can give me the ultimate shalom I'm looking for, then, then, we're in business, to enjoy and to see life. See life as a gift from this one who loved me, created me, and despite my own sin and falling, gave His life for me, to save me and to give me new life. It's then that I can experience joy. Amen? I don't know how this speaks a word of God to you, but to just put it out there. And as we go to the bread and the cup and into the time of worship, I would just encourage you like Pascal says, examine our hearts. Are any of us like white-knuckled clinching our teeth holding on to the person, situation, or a certain outcome that's robbing you of joy? Listen to the Teacher. Are there any of us under the illusion that this person or career or something in my life, you realize I'm working so hard because I really think this is it, this is the best it's ever going to get. It's an illusion. It's a pointer for the best that is yet to come, that sounds cliché, I'm sorry, the best that's yet to come.

Ecclesiastes P2: The Gift

Alright, thanks for listening. Just as a side note, I remember being deeply impacted as I studied and reflected on the themes for this message. It's been a very rich set of ideas that have turned into a set of practices in my old life, trying to push my own mind and heart towards contentment and receiving life as it comes to me, rather than as I prefer it to be. And I don't know where that lands with you today, but I trust that that's something that you need to hear as well.

[45:00]

So God's peace be with you all, and thanks for listening to My Strange Bible Podcast.