

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

The Hard and Simple Life of Joy

Main idea: Be content, or else you'll never feel content.

I generally have a very bad memory, so trying to remember what I need to do and when is almost always impossible. So when I first got a smartphone with a calendar app, it was the most awesome thing. I would refer to it as my brain, because I no longer needed to try to remember anything. I tap a few buttons, put it in my calendar, and I wouldn't have to remember it anymore, because my phone would remember it for me. So I heavily rely on my calendar to schedule when I need to do things.

But I actually had to stop doing that to some degree because it got completely out of hand.

Here's what happened. I thought I would schedule all the little things that had to happen every week and even every day as I remembered to do them. So I put on my daily schedule things like "drink water" and "take vitamins" and "eat a vegetable," along with more important things, like "read the Bible" and "pray." And then, I even had my prayer life super organized, so that I wouldn't forget to pray for anything or anyone that I had ever said I would pray for. So I had a massively long list. At one point, I woke up and had 20 things that I was supposed to do before I left the house: some big, and some small, and I was extremely overwhelmed and didn't want to do any of them!

When I first started doing all that, I thought I was simplifying my life, because then I wouldn't have to try to remember anything. But after a while, I realized I had made my life so much more complicated because I had made my life just about getting through all the things I had on my list.

I learned in the process that life is not a to-do list. Even if you get everything on your list done, that's not the purpose of life.

I don't know about you, but I have the tendency to over complicate life. I don't do it intentionally, or all at once, but sometimes I look at my to-do list and think, "What is all this junk?" And I have to intentionally take things off my list that at one point I thought were so important. Because God doesn't want us overwhelmed with all the things we think we have to do. He wants us singularly focused on Him.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Father, help us to give You praise for the good things you give us, and not waste our lives complaining about our lot in life. In all of the busyness of life, help us to remember You. In Jesus's name, Amen.

As we've talked about before, a lot of the book of Ecclesiastes seems very bleak, and hopeless. We've often seen over the last couple of months in studying this book how the Teacher names many things that we often go after in life, like money, and status, thinking that these kinds of things will satisfy us, but he explains how they're all ultimately meaningless, like chasing after the wind, which we can never catch. And we'll see even more of this in the weeks and months to come, because if we're honest, there's a whole lot of meaningless in this world that we can get sucked into, and we're tempted to make our lives revolve around meaningless things, and we need to be reminded over and over again to center our lives around what truly matters, and not the meaningless things that we often choose.

Pursuing lesser, meaningless things is one way that the Bible describes sin. We often think of sin as being the big things like murder and adultery, and those are certainly sinful, but sin is far more than that. If God is truly worthy of all praise, then anytime we fail to give Him the glory that He deserves, it's sin.

And it seems that we do that pretty much all the time. We often make life less about God, and more about us: our desires, our plans, our accomplishments. We attempt to steal His glory. And in the process, we try to be fulfilled in our attempts to make life about us, and it leaves us feeling empty. Rather than delighting fully in the Lord, we default to seeking to delight in ourselves, which isn't pleasing in God's sight, because it's not how we were created to live, and it leaves us feeling very unsatisfied in the things we thought would satisfy us. That's pretty much what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about.

And yet, there are a few verses of hope in Ecclesiastes sprinkled amidst what reads like hopelessness. I can't wait to preach on verses like Ecclesiastes 3:11, which says in the ESV that God:

...has made everything beautiful in its time. (Ecclesiastes 3:11a, ESV)

What a beautiful and awesome thought! Another one is Ecclesiastes 9:4, which says in the Easy-to-Read Version:

There is hope for those who are still alive—it does not matter who they are. (Ecclesiastes 9:4a, ERV)

And that should give all of us a lot of hope, because I'm sure we've all worried about certain individuals that we know, wondering if there's any hope for them. And then, of course, the book culminates in chapter 12 with this statement:

When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

So while most of the book of Ecclesiastes focuses on all the ways that we might waste our lives, there are a few verses here and there that direct us to rest in good things, and those things do lead to being satisfied in life. Our text today is one such passage.

The Teacher tells us in verse 24:

There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. (Ecclesiastes 2:24a)

We talked last time about how it's pointless to work in order to earn stuff, because you can't take the stuff that you earn with you when you die, and everything you've gathered will eventually be passed on to the next generation, who may or may not use it in the way that you hoped. So working for stuff is pointless, like chasing after the wind. If you work for stuff, whether for material possessions or even for a higher standard of living for future generations, you'll find that it's a never-ending pursuit that will never satisfy you. There's always more stuff to gather. There's always a higher ideal to chase after. And no matter where you start in the process, there's no end to it.

When Anna and I went to Haiti for a mission trip a few years back, we saw all kinds of devastating needs.

[Pictures of Haiti]



This was 4 years after the 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti in 2010. Even prior to that, Haiti was already one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, but as of now, it is the poorest. We saw children with little to no clothes or food. We saw families living with nothing in their homes, and their homes were falling down. And yet, despite their bleak circumstances, we met people who had hope. They had joy in watching out for one another. They had joy in serving one another, and even in serving us as we sought to serve them.

A lot of our work centered around working through a local church there. I still remember how, towards the end of our time there, the people in the church wanted to bless us. And they didn't have a lot, but they gave us each a plate of rice with a small piece of meat. I still don't know what that meat was, but it was all they could give us. And they wanted to give it to us. It was their joy to give it to us.

I think this has meaning precisely because it's the heart of God. It says in Hebrews 12:2 that Jesus:

For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2b)

Jesus's heart toward you was to endure the suffering and shame of the cross in order to save you, so that you might find your joy in Him.

You see, hope and joy aren't found in how much you have, or even if you have anything at all. And while it's still true, like we saw last time, that we can't find ultimate satisfaction in the results of our work, Solomon writes that we can find enjoyment in the work itself as you serve the Lord. Look at the rest of the verse.

I have seen that even this is from God's hand, because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? (Ecclesiastes 2:24b-25)

The answer, of course, is no one. Everything comes from God's hand, whether we recognize it or not, and we can do nothing apart from Him.

It says in John 1:4 about Jesus:

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1:4)

In other words, Jesus is the life, and the only reason we have life is because of Jesus. Paul preached to the people in Athens about God, saying:

For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.' (Acts 17:28)

We all came into existence only because God gave us life. And we all continue to exist because He sustains the whole universe so that we can move and have our being. Even every breath we take is a direct gift from God.

So we should enjoy our work, because our work is a gift from God. And no matter how much or how little we have of them, we should enjoy our food, and our drink, and everything else not because we're seeking enjoyment necessarily from those things in and of themselves, but because we're thankful to God who gives us these things, as it says in 1 Corinthians 10:31:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

It's actually meaningless to be content in food and drink apart from recognizing where these things come from. Because even if you're happy you have a great meal now, what if there's a massive earthquake, and you don't know when your next great meal will be. All of our luxuries in this life are temporary, but when you recognize where they come from, you find that you have an eternal blessing, because God is eternal. And then, all of a

sudden, you find that you don't even need the temporal blessings as much anymore. That's what Paul wrote about in Philippians.

I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12-13)

When you see that God is the source of all these things, then everything is a blessing. Food is a blessing, and even hunger can be a blessing because it directs you to hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sex is a blessing, and even singleness can be a blessing because you can devote yourself completely to the Lord. When we recognize that every good thing is from God, we can truly rejoice in everything, as Paul wrote in Romans:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5, ESV)

When you have faith in Jesus, you have everything you need.

Verse 26.

For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:26)

It's interesting that whenever surveys are taken to see who are the happiest people, they find that religious people rank as the happiest people on the

earth. And among religious people, they find that Christians are some of the happiest.¹ I don't think that's an accident.

Children and teens who believe in God tend to be healthier and happier than those who don't. They're more resilient, they have better self-control, and have a greater sense of meaning.² One psychoanalyst even went so far as to say that she encourages parents who don't believe in God to lie to their kids, because their kids will be healthier and happier if they do believe in God.³

Now, of course there are always exceptions to these things, but I think the exceptions actually prove the rule. Another study found that the acts of going to church, participating in religious activities, and even praying, had little to do with happiness, but rather doing these things out of a genuine faith made all the difference.⁴ In other words, a happy life has little to do with what we do, and everything to do with faith in the God who has done everything for us, so that we might rest in Him.

In the same way, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes seems to be saying that if you're miserable, maybe you haven't been looking to God as the source of your happiness. If you're trying to be happy in stuff, it's a never-ending pursuit, like chasing after the wind, because as soon as you get something, you either lose it, or need to give it away. But the one who is pleasing in God's sight isn't concerned about stuff; he enjoys the wisdom and knowledge and joy that come from God.

In other words, you can't play games with God. You can't have one foot in the door, and one foot in the world and expect to be happy. God wants you to give all your life to Jesus, because He gave all of His life for you.

¹ <https://theconversation.com/are-religious-people-happier-than-non-religious-people-87394>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/2014/01/23/f6522120-8452-11e3-bbe5-6a2a3141e3a9_story.html

³ <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dont-believe-in-god-lie-to-your-children/>

⁴ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/01/090108082904.htm>