

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 3 - The Search for Lasting Joy

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, 18-26

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 26, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** He is already one of the most beloved Disney characters of all time. His name is Olaf and he is a snowman. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** If you haven't seen *Frozen* or *Frozen 2*, Olaf is the character that brings humour to the whole story.
 - In the first movie he sings one of the funniest songs you will ever hear as this snowman dreams about **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** lying on the burning sand, getting gorgeously tanned, and finding out what happens to solid water when it gets warm.
- *Frozen 2* came out this past Christmas. Olaf is even more funny in this movie but his humour is also meant to communicate one of the key themes of the movie, which is the search for joy that is permanent.
 - In one scene Olaf says to princess Anna, **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** *"Tell me, you're older, and thus all-knowing, do you ever worry about the notion that nothing is permanent?"*
 - Anna then sings a song called "Some Things Never Change" where she speaks of certain joys that she can completely rely on like love.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** *Yes, some things never change
Like the feel of your hand in mine
Some things stay the same
Like how we get along just fine
Like an old stone wall that'll never fall
Some things are always true
Some things never change
Like how I'm holding on tight to you*
- But Anna's views are shown to be naïve and Olaf's anxiety is shown to be true. The joys they thought were permanent are shown to be impermanent.
 - Relationships break down. Queen Elsa pushes Anna and Olaf away and he experiences the anger of betrayal for the first time. The mighty kingdom of Arendelle starts falling apart.
 - It all reaches a low point when Olaf says to Anna, **"You said some things never change, but since then, everything has done nothing but change."** The magic that holds Olaf together disappears and he disintegrates in Anna's arms. The beloved Olaf dies and children everywhere cried.
- I won't spoil the ending for you but the question that plagued Olaf is the same question that plagued King Solomon. The thesis question is stated in Ecclesiastes 1:3 **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** **"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"** The word "gain" is a banking term. It refers to a surplus—to money left over after all the expenses are paid.
 - Solomon is saying that we put all this effort into our lives on this earth—we toil at relationships, work, projects, education, careers, and hobbies.
 - When all is said and done, what do we have to show for it? What remains on the balance sheet of life? Is there something that is permanent?
- Solomon's give the answer to his question right away. He says that nothing remains. Everything is vanity. The word translated as "vanity" is "hebel" which is literally "breath" or "vapour."
 - Life, like a puff of breath, quickly disappears. Life, like a puff of breath, is elusive. You cannot grab it and make it last.

- This whole book is one big speech to convince you of this because, like Anna our naivety about life only leads to sorrow. We need to be wise. Only when you come to see that all is hebel will you learn how to live wisely and find the joy you are looking for.
 - Today the Preacher is going show us how he came to this conclusion. He says he performed an experiment. The result of this experiment led him into despair. But the result also caused him to change his perspective and this led to joy.
 - So let's do three things today: let's join the experiment, mourn the result, and change our perspective that we might live wisely and with joy.

JOIN THE EXPERIMENT

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** First, let's **join the experiment** that Solomon performed.
 - Look at verse 1. **READ 1 - *I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was [hebel].***
- This word pleasure is good but it's a bit tricky because we may think of it as forbidden pleasures. More literally it refers to joy, or that which gladdens our hearts. So, he is going to experiment with the things people *do* in life that bring gladness of heart in order to see if anything lasts.
 - But he tells us right away that it was all hebel—nothing lasted in such a way as to produce a surplus at the end. Laughter is mad, not in the sense that it is wrong but that it is fleeting. So, in verse 2 he asks what use is joy or a glad heart? He doesn't answer yet. In verse 3 he begins his experiment.
- He uses wine as a test case. Note carefully, it doesn't say he went on a weekend of binge drinking with his buddies. In verse 3 that he says that even while his body was enjoying some wine, his mind is still in control for he was still being guided by wisdom.
 - The drinking of wine is not a foolish action. In fact, later in 9:7 says, **(SHOW SLIDE 8) "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do."** So wine is a good gift from God to be enjoyed and everywhere the Bible warns against drunkenness for it is a sin and leads to destruction.
 - So the experiment is this: he let his senses enjoy a nice bottle of Merlot. As he drank it he used his mind to think about where the folly of wine can lead and to see if the joy it brings can last.
- A lot of people misunderstand Ecclesiastes 2. They think that the point is to show that Solomon he tried to find meaning in life through money, sex, and power only to discover that they are meaningless and only God can satisfy.
 - Yet, once again, I point out to you that Solomon's big question is not to discover the meaning of life. In the second half of verse 3 he says he did this experiment **READ 3 - *till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.***
 - So this is not about trying to find meaning in life but about experimenting with all the things human beings do to see if anything lasts.
- That is why he now turns to talk about all the projects he gave himself to. **READ 4-7 - *⁴I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.***
 - Solomon devoted decades to this work to see if it would gladden his heart. The houses he built include vast building projects.

- Solomon built residential houses, commercial buildings, and buildings for military use.¹ His own palace took 13 years to build.² He also built cities of Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Beth-horon, Baalath, and Tadmor.
 - All of this is meant to be interpreted positively for the words here are all taken from the Garden of Eden. Verse 3 literally reads what “the children of Adam” do. And what did Adam do? He was to work the garden, to subdue the earth using its resources for human flourishing, and have lots of kids.
 - The exact language of the Garden of Eden is used here: “Plant”, “garden,” “trees of all fruits”, “to water,” “to sprout,” “to do,” and “to make.”
 - So Solomon is fulfilling what God has called humans to do under the sun.
 - He then goes on to describe all his wealth. Verse 7 talks about the fact that he bought slaves. This is not an endorsement of slavery but simply says he had them. Then look at the second half of verse 8. **READ 7b-8 - I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.**
 - Gold and silver from tribute and commercial trade came into Israel by the ton.³ Alongside the gold and silver were the treasures that came in that included apes, peacocks, ivory, fabric, jewels, spices, weapons, and lots of horses.⁴ He also had a lot of people skilled in the arts and entertainment who brought him joy.
 - This last phrase about concubines is difficult. If you note the footnote, the translators say, “The meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain.” It is a guess that it means concubines, of which Solomon had many. Again, this is not a comment on the rightness or wrongness of this but simply stating that he had them.
 - Then look at his summary in verses 9-10. **READ 9-10 - ⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.**
 - He’s not boasting. God promised to bless him with wisdom and also with wealth and success. Note again, this is not about how he tried to find meaning in money, sex, and power and found it wanting. Again, the point of this experiment is to look at all the things that gladden our hearts, especially the work God has given for us to do, and see if they can give something that lasts.
 - This is very clear from looking at verse 10 where he said, **my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.** So, he is not saying work is meaningless. He is saying that his work did bring him meaning and joy. But now he is stepping back from it and asks, **“What do I have to show for it all? Will anything be left after all is said and done?”**
 - So, after decades of this experiment, what was the result? Was anything permanent?

MOURN THE RESULT

- Let’s come to the second point now. Having joined the experiment, we now must **(SHOW SLIDE 9) mourn the result.**

¹ 2 Chron 8:1-6; 1 Kgs 9:15-19.

² 1 Kgs 9:10.

³ 1 Kgs 10:14-21; 2 Chron 9:27.

⁴ 1 Kgs 10:22-25.

- Look at verse 11. **READ 11** - ¹¹ *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was [hebel] and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*
- He is not saying there is no joy or gladness from all that we do in life because he has just said he did find joy in his work. His point is that nothing is ultimately gained.
 - At the end of the day everything is a puff of breath. It is here and enjoyed and then it is gone. Just as it is impossible to make the wind do what you want, so also you cannot take all your efforts and shape them into a lasting gain.
- Yet Solomon anticipates an objection. Someone might say, **“yes, we all die and so nothing last forever but isn’t it a gain if you can give all you worked for to your kids or to charity?”**
 - Solomon also considers this in verses 18-23. He says, **“yes, that might be something that remains but what if the one you give it to is a fool? All your efforts will have been in vain.”**
 - The great irony is that this is exactly what happened to Solomon. All of his wealth was given to his son Rehoboam. Within a very short period of time Rehoboam made some foolish choices that resulted in Solomon’s great kingdom being split in two and engaged in war with each other.⁵
- And so Solomon falls into discouragement and even despair. Note again, this is not because he lived a godless life and feels that everything is meaningless. He falls into despair because all the effort that he put into his projects does not produce any permanent gain. Everything he has done is hebel—a puff of breath that is here and then gone. So much effort, so much toil, and nothing remains at the end of it all.
 - This makes me think of a man named Glenn Fobert who was an engineer in Ontario. For twenty years he worked at a manufacturing plant until the plant was shut down and Fobert was laid off. He writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “Two years later I returned to the plant and toured the empty shell of the building in the cold of winter. The men were gone, the machinery was gone, the lights were out, and the rain had leaked through the roof, forming puddles of ice. I was depressed by the sight, and began to wonder if all the effort I had put into keeping that old plant operating was worth it.”**⁶
- It is the same for you and I. For all the effort you have put into your career, nothing will last. All of our projects, houses, relationships, and hobbies, will melt like a snowman.
 - Author Julian Barnes reminds us that when we die some people will remember us for a while and praise some things we did. But it will not be too long before a day comes when there is only one person left in the world that remembers us and visits our grave. Eventually that person will also die. Then everything about who we are and what we have done will be forgotten.
 - And then to try and inject some humour into an otherwise depressing reality, Barnes notes that there will be one more person to visit your grave - **“the man driving the earth-digger who scoops out your remnants when the graveyard is sold off for suburban housing.”**⁷
- So, what should we conclude? Since nothing will last should we just give up and say everything is meaningless? Should we join in the despair of Macbeth? After his wife had died and the armies were marching against him, he said,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale**

⁵ 1 Kgs 11:41-12:24.

⁶ Glenn Robert, *Balance Living in a Changing World: Solomon’s Practical Advice in the Mist Version of Ecclesiastes*, 73-74.

⁷ Julian Barnes, *Nothing to be Frightened Of*, Location 3673, Kindle.

***Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.***

- Should that be our response? Not at all! Solomon does not conclude that life is meaningless just because nothing lasts. Rather, this fact causes him to have a complete change in perspective which then allows him to live a life of joy.

CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

- So, we have joined him in his experiment. We have mourned with him in the result. Now finally, listen to Solomon's call to **(SHOW SLIDE 12) change your perspective.**
 - You can see that there is a major change in perspective between the despair of verse 23 and the start of verse 24. Verse 24 begins with ***“There is nothing better for a person.”*** In other words, ***“Here is the best way for a person to live.”***
- What is really important is to recognize that this forms a conclusion to the first section of the book. Up to this point everything has been about giving us a giant reality check: even though there is meaning and joy in our work, none of it will last. We will all die, and all be forgotten, and this fact will change our perspective.
 - ***READ 24-26 - ²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.***
- So those who do not know God devote their lives to building up money, wealth and power that will not last. This is hebel. But what does God give to the one who lives for him and pleases him? Wisdom and joy. And what does it mean to live a wise life that is filled with joy? It means accepting the reality that everything is a puff of breath and enjoying the gift of breath while you have it.
 - There is one story in the Old Testament that captures all of this. It is the story of the manna in the desert. The Israelites were hungry. Each and every day God gave the gift of manna. But it was very temporary because it would rot after one day. The Israelites were not supposed to try and store it up but rather to simply enjoy it each day as a gift from God and trust that God would give the gift again the next day.
 - So too Solomon says that even though nothing remains he found joy in the work God gave him and that joy was its own reward.
- Jesus, the true and wiser Solomon, elaborated on this: he commanded his people not to spend their days in anxiously chasing after more and more possessions and hoarding them.
 - Rather, he said to work hard, trust that the Father will provide for you, and seek after his kingdom.
- So you see, a godly and wise person recognize that everything is temporary. We will all die. But God has also given us good gifts to be enjoyed. Listen to Glen Forbert complete his thought about his life's work.
 - ***(SHOW SLIDE 13) My first reaction was depression, but as I thought of the people who had made a good income while working there, and of the many products made and the good use they had been put to, I realized that, although the plant was now dead, it had served me and many others well. We had, for the most part, enjoyed our work, and I realized that was a great reward. Our work was not meaningless, but the closure and lay-off were disappointing.***⁸

⁸ Glenn Robert, *Balance Living in a Changing World: Solomon's Practical Advice in the Mist Version of Ecclesiastes, 73-74.*

- That is the right perspective. Far too often Christians think that holiness means being serious and not really enjoying themselves. Oh yes, we are not to abuse God’s good gifts of food, sex, wealth, or power. Yes, yes, yes! But we see here that living a God-centred life means enjoying what we have as good gifts from God’s hands.
 - Maybe some of you are saying, **“Careful Barton, you might encourage people toward excess or sin?”**
 - I think the Church has well emphasized the fact that we are not to abuse God’s good gifts. Have we equally emphasized the fact God gives things to be enjoyed? Throughout this entire book Solomon will emphasize that we are to find joy in the daily moments God gives. Not in drunkenness or one-night stands but enjoying the good gifts he gives us.
- Is this not what we see in Jesus himself? Joy and gladness run right through Jesus’ ministry, especially Luke’s gospel where Jesus just seems to go from party to party to party. As one commentator writes, **“Jesus literally ate his way through the Gospels.”**⁹ In fact, the religious leaders of the day said Jesus was enjoying God’s daily gifts so much that they accused him of gluttony.
 - Jesus attends weddings, eats meals, and turns water into fine wine when the party starts to fall apart. He describes the kingdom of God as a feast and when a sinner turns back to God a party is to be thrown. He enjoys the Passover feast the night before he dies and as soon as he is resurrected he is eating breakfast on the beach with Peter and enjoying a meal with two disciples after a long walk on the road to Emmaus.
- And then Jesus, the true and wiser Solomon, revealed something that Solomon did not know. Solomon had a very limited understanding of what happened after death.
 - In Jesus we learn that there are things that last. It is possible to do work and toil that will remain forever. That does not negate Solomon’s point for we will all die but it adds a whole other piece. We can use our wealth to store up treasure in heaven. The simplest act can last because of what Jesus has done for us.
 - Through his death and resurrection Jesus punched a hole through death itself so that there are things that can pass through it. As Paul argues, if Christ has not been raised then everything is truly in vain. However, Christ has been raised from the dead and so Paul calls us to stand firm (**SHOW SLIDE 14**) **“always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”**

CONCLUSION

- So yes, all of life is a breath. We will all die. Since this is true, the wise and godly person does not devote their whole life to trying to build up great wealth, power, or themselves. Rather, they enjoy the daily work God has given them and the other daily gifts from his hands and they use their lives in service to him.
 - All of God’s good gifts point beyond themselves to Jesus himself. Jesus is the bread of life. He is the living water that will satisfy.
 - Jesus says a day is coming when anyone who believes in him will sit down the greatest wedding feast you’ve ever experienced. And he invites us to it saying, **“Anyone who thirsts, come and drink from the water of life.”**
- Do you want true lasting joy? Bow your knee to your Creator. Receive Jesus’ gift of forgiveness.
 - And then enjoy your lunch. Give thanks for moments of joy. Serve him knowing that in him there is joy that lasts forever.

⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 98.