

Searching for Satisfaction Under the Sun

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 September 2023

Preacher: Donald Smith

[0 : 0 0] a fairly long one, isn't it? There's a lot in there. And a few times in preparing a sermon have I felt myself having to skip over so much. So let me just say before we get stuck into this evening's passage, if there is a verse in there that stuck with you or struck you or confused you, and I don't address it in the next half hour or so, please come and speak to me afterwards and ask about it. It's not because I'm trying to skip over the difficult bits or anything, and I just don't want to be here all night as I try and explain every part of this amazing chapter of God's Word. So please do, as I say, come and speak to me afterwards if you still have questions.

But let me just try and scratch the surface for us all of what the teacher is showing us here. Remember, just before we read that passage, I was explaining that the teacher's kind of opening monologue left him with a question. If our lives are so short, so fleeting, so transients, what then should we do with them? What is the best way to live the short years of this life? What is the best way to live life under the sun? If you just look down at verse 13 of chapter 1 Come with me. You'll see that the teacher applies his mind, doesn't he, to study and explore by wisdom all that is under the heavens, everything there is.

He is going to explore it all. He's setting out on a quest to find satisfaction, to see if there is anything under the sun that can satisfy his internal longing. His longing for something to last more than just a breath. His longing for good, for happiness, for joy, for contentment.

That is what the teacher wants to see if he can find under the sun. And that is the journey we are all on, is it not? We want to be happy, don't we? There's nothing wrong with that.

Let me just make clear for a second that what Ecclesiastes is going to show us this evening is absolutely in line with the rest of the Bible. As the teacher sets out on his quest to find what is good, to find the best way to live this life. There's nothing sinful about wanting to be happy.

[2 : 4 8] There might be something sinful in the way you go about trying to find happiness, but the desire itself is not wrong because the Bible, and therefore God's, this is His Word, is very pro-happiness. It is pro-joy. If you have visions in your head of churches being dreary places, full of very solemn, miserable faces, I understand why you think that, but that's not what God wants for His people. Maybe, as Joel was saying this morning, you think the Bible is just full of rules and commands and that Christianity is just generally a bit of a killjoy.

Well, there are a lot of commands, but one of the most common commands in the Bible is to rejoice, to be glad. God is not a cosmic killjoy.

He doesn't want you to be miserable. He wants you to be happy like you want to be happy. The commands aren't restraints on your life. They're not the way we can get right with God.

Joel made that clear this morning, didn't he? Faith in Jesus is the only way to that. But the commands in the Bible are quite literally the Maker's instructions. Right? He made you so He knows the way to get most out of your life.

Well, I don't unpack my IKEA flatback furniture, of which there's been much in the last couple of weeks, and look at the instruction book and think, oh, what a constraint on my freedom.

[4 : 42] Of course you don't think of that. You look at it and you think, thank goodness the person who's made this has given me instructions of how to put it together. I'm very thankful that they've told me how to make it work.

God wants you to get the most out of life. That is why He has given you His words. That is why He gives us His commands. That is why He has given us the book of Ecclesiastes.

It is to teach us the way to live life that will leave us most satisfied. And we'll see that it's not self-indulgent.

We'll see that the way, as we go on, we'll see that the best way to live life is to love others and to love God. And we'll get there in the coming chapters as we go through this great book.

But if we want to be happy, that's very rarely where we turn first, is it? If you think, I want to have a great day today, I want to be happy at the end of it, we very rarely think, so I'm going to go and love others and love God with all my heart.

[6 : 01] When we want to be happy, we try finding joy and satisfaction in everything under the sun, don't we? In learning, in alcohol, in wealth and possessions, in fame and fortune, in sex, in relationships.

And so the teacher says, okay then, let's try it all. Let's try it all. So he acquires wisdom, right?

He knows what he's doing, and then he's quite deliberately, if you look at verse 1 of chapter 2, he quite deliberately gets out to test life.

I said to myself, come now, I will test you, as myself, with pleasure to find out what is good. He goes about indulging his heart's every desire.

Whatever he thinks will make him happy, he goes and does it. Nothing stands in his way. He tries laughter and wine. He builds for himself houses and gardens, vineyards and orchards.

[7 : 15] He acquires unbelievable wealth and fame. He tries it all. He has it all. He can get it all. More laughter, he watches every stand-up comedian going on Netflix.

More wine, he plants his own vineyard. A bigger house, he just builds more houses. Better food, I'll plant orchards and groves of flourishing trees. He owns more herds and flocks than anyone before it.

More money, he adds a long line of zeros to the bank account. He has piles and piles of silver and gold. Think this ancient sage would be impressed with Spotify?

He's got his own personal orchestra following him about, playing whatever he wants, wherever he wants. Everything his heart desired, he went and got it.

That is what's happening between verse 1 and 9. He lived the life most people dream of living. Surely, this is the way to happiness.

[8 : 27] He gets it all. But it doesn't work. He summarizes his findings in verse 10 and 11 of chapter 2.

It says, I denied myself nothing. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart, no pleasure.

He got himself everything he wanted, everything he thought would make him happy. And it did, but only for a moment.

It's very important, I think, to hear exactly what the teacher is saying here in these verses. He tried all of life's pleasures, indulged the heart's desires, and there were times, if you look at verse 10, there were times when his heart delighted in what he had done.

There were moments of joy. One of the many great things about Ecclesiastes is that it deals with life as it really is, doesn't it?

[9 : 43] So the teacher kind of says, if you look at the business tycoon on her jet ski doing laps around her private island in the Caribbean with a big grin on her face, well, we sometimes feel that the proper Christian answer is to say, well, she's not really happy deep down, is she?

But the teacher looks at life and says, well, if she's riding a jet ski around her private island with a big grin on her face, she's probably happy. The reason she looks like she's having a good time is probably because she is having a good time.

The teacher finds that the good things in life do and can bring delight, joy, and happiness. Let's not pretend otherwise. People rightly won't take us seriously if we do, but here's the problem.

He wants us to get our heads around, verse 11. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was a breath, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. all the pleasures of life were but a breath.

[11 : 13] They were there for a moment and then they were gone the next. There was the briefest moment of satisfaction, but it didn't last.

I wonder if that sounds familiar at all. You get what your heart desires and it satisfies, it makes you happy, but only for the briefest of moments.

And then you have to go chasing the next moment, forever chasing, the teacher says trying to hold on to those moments is like chasing after the winds.

There was always something more to go and get. The heart was never fully satisfied with all the pleasures under the sun.

I remember reading a few years ago an academic called Michael Norton. He's a Harvard business school professor. He surveyed 2,000 people who all had a net worth of at least a million dollars.

[12 : 32] Many of them had much more than that. He asked every one of them how happy they were on a scale of one to ten and how much more money they would need to be a perfect ten all the time.

every single one of these millionaires said they would need two or three times as much money as they had before they thought they'd finally be happy.

The one who had a million thought they needed two million. But the one who had two million thought they needed five million. The one who had five million ten.

The one who had ten twenty-five. And on and on and on. They all every single one of them thought that in order to finally be happy they just needed a bit more.

But the ones who had more thought exactly the same thing. That is the cycle so much of this world lives in, isn't it?

[13 : 57] It's easier to measure with money but it's not just money. Maybe you're expecting happiness to come from a fresh relationship. One more night out, a new job, a larger house, a bigger family, the next promotion.

If I just get one more step up, then I'll be happy. The teacher's tried it all.

And he turns and says quite bluntly, no you won't. No, you won't. You'll enjoy the new job for a second and then the joy will be gone and you'll go searching for the next one.

You'll buy the phone you desperately won and then in a year the next one will come out and you won't be satisfied anymore. more. There are many pleasures in life but they're all like a breath.

Here one moment, gone the next, and spending your life forever chasing after the next digit on the bank balance. Thinking that will finally make you happy is like chasing after the wind.

[15 : 18] it's like scooping up sand with a sift. And so although he gave his heart all that it delighted in, the teacher found that his heart soon began to despair.

Verse 20, my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. He gave his heart everything it ever wanted and yet just a few verses later it is despairing.

What's gone wrong? What is going wrong for the teacher? Let me give you a clue, a breath, a breath.

everything is a breath. The pleasures that he was enjoying but also the life that he was living.

For all that he had gained, for all his piles of silver and gold, for all the wisdom he acquired, for all the university degrees he had, for all the gardens he planted, for all the houses he built, for all the wine he had drunk, for all the herds and flocks that he owned, for all the singers that followed him around, for all the great things he had done in life, he found himself right next to the fool who had done nothing.

[16 : 51] Side by side, both facing exactly the same fate at the end of it all. Yes, wisdom was better than folly, but, verse 15, the fate of the fool will overtake me also.

What then do I gain by being wise? This too is a breath, for the wise like the fool will not be long remembered. The days have already come when both have been forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise too must die. death is coming.

So, what is the point in trying to gain anything under the sun? A probing question the teacher wants us to ask ourselves is, why do you bother doing what you do?

Verse 22, what do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? What do you expect? What are you hoping for?

[18 : 13] One day you are going to die like everyone before you and everyone after you. Or do you try and live pretending that death doesn't exist?

or maybe convincing yourself that it is definitely decades away in the future and not a problem for now. The teacher faces the reality of death and when he sees it coming, he is forced to ask himself, what is the point of all my toilsome labor?

what am I doing here? What have I actually gained by all my achievements that I have worked so hard for? And the answer is really not very much at all.

Yes, there were a few moments of pleasure, but they came and went. They came and went, and so at the end, the teacher finds himself empty-handed.

He has gained nothing. It is no wonder that his heart begins to despair. But that is not the end of the matter.

[19 : 45] Again, I mentioned last week that the teacher is here to undo our thinking, isn't he? He shows us the folly of the way we so often live our lives, but he does it to show us a better way.

Just keep a finger in Ecclesiastes 2 and turn back with me to John 4. It's page 1066 in the church Bibles.

The problem the teacher saw with life's pleasures is that satisfaction was, like everything else, a breath. It didn't last, did it?

And as he went looking for the next dose, he found himself chasing after the winds. I think Jesus' words here will hopefully help us to understand the teacher's message with even greater clarity, as well as shed light on the bigger biblical picture that Ecclesiastes is part of.

death. The teacher had to keep on going back for more and more, didn't he? And found that no matter how many fleeting pleasures he enjoyed in life, death was waiting for him anyway and he was empty handed.

[21 : 07] But what if death wasn't the end of the matter? In fact, what if death was the end of our brief life, but only the beginning of our eternal life?

Look at Jesus' words in verse 13 and 14. Jesus answered the woman, everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again.

But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

There is water, I'm not saying this is the point of John 4, it's just a helpful analogy. There is water that we need to keep going back for.

The right answer isn't listen to Jesus and stop going to the well for water. It's good and necessary that the woman keep on going back to the well to quench her thirst.

[22 : 26] But the point is there is more to life. There is more to it. than the water at the well. There is more to what God offers us than the temporary satisfactions we can find in this world.

The pleasures do exist but there is more. The Son of God comes to offer something much better on top of all those temporary satisfactions.

life. He gives us lasting satisfaction by offering us everlasting life. Eternal life.

Not a breath. Not a chasing after the wind but a life that goes on into eternity forever and ever. forever. That's the life you have.

And if you are a believer here in Jesus this evening, that is the life you have. A life after death that will never end, then you are free.

[23 : 45] You are free to stop trying to gain from life under the sun. You can rest from trying to fill the storehouses of this brief life and look forward to a never ending life in a renewed creation.

That's the eternal life Jesus offers to those who would repent and believe in him. And when we live in light of that, when we are ready to die, it radically changes how we can live this life.

Indeed, being ready to die is the key to enjoying this life. And we do both of those things well.

We prepare to die well and we live well by accepting the gifts of God. up there in verse 10 of John 4, if you knew the gift of God, that's the key to being ready to face death.

Knowing the gift of God. Come back to Ecclesiastes 2 with me. And look at the conclusion the teacher comes to. Having tested all the pleasures that this life has to offer, having to try to gain all he could from life.

[25 : 12] verse 24. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil.

This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him who can eat or find enjoyment to the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge.

happiness. Once again, in the words of Ian Proven, life is gift, not gain.

Life is gift, not gain. And indeed, it's the same point Joel was making at the end of the service this morning.

when we see life through Jesus, we realize that we are but pilgrims here, journeying on.

[26 : 24] You don't need to bed down your roots. Indeed, you better not be trying to settle. But journeying through this life, knowing that God has promised something better to come, it frees us up, doesn't it?

To enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this life, without expecting them to give us the lasting satisfaction that only Jesus can. if you are in Jesus, you do not need to worry about death, nor do you need to worry about gaining anything from this life.

So enjoy it while you can. When you sit down for a meal, enjoy the food in front of you.

Don't rush away from the table to send an email for work or get on with a few chores that the kids have stopped you from finishing. Stop and see what good things God has given you to delight in.

And enjoy them. I think the teacher deliberately picks up on food and drink and work as the most repetitive things in our lives.

[27 : 44] Things pretty much every person does every day. life is a gift. God has given you many good things.

And so make sure you're enjoying them instead of forever focusing your eyes on what you might gain. The gain will not make you any happier.

I think you can ask anyone in this room who is retired whether it was all the money they earned over their years of work that made them happier than they were 50 years ago.

You fear God by accepting his good gifts and enjoying them as they were meant to be enjoyed. All those things, all those pleasures that the teacher tested life with in chapter two are there to simply be enjoyed.

God didn't give us wine to trip us up. It was for us to enjoy. And you can enjoy a glass of red so long as you don't expect more wine to give you more satisfaction.

[29 : 08] Enjoy laughter and music, gardens and buildings, enjoy your learning at school and university. Who knows where it'll get you, maybe nowhere, but make use of the good gift God has given you and enjoy learning about him through his creation and his people.

Share what you learn with others, speak of God's goodness through the marvels of chemistry and physics, medicine and art, language and sport. enjoy your work, find satisfaction in your toil, look out for God's good gifts and how your toil is part of God's good world.

Whatever you do, it is enabling someone somewhere to enjoy God's good gift of the world. If you work in a cafe, you're helping people enjoy God's good gift of coffee and I am very thankful for you.

If you're a doctor or a nurse or a pharmacist, you are helping to restore people to health, to undo in a little way the effect of sin.

That's an amazing thing. If you're a binman, you are keeping the country clean so people can enjoy God's creation and his creative people. If you're working in the oil industry or renewables or whatever kind, you are part of a process that enables people, ambulances, to get to those who need it.

[30 : 48] You are keeping people's homes warm. You are keeping the foods in my fridge cold. If you're a mum, you're caring and growing the next generation of people who will stand on our shoulders and hopefully serve God and enjoy his world in greater ways than we ever could.

jobs. They are all amazing jobs, every one of them. So enjoy them. That's why you should get out of bed in the morning.

Because this whole world is full of good gifts that we can enjoy and help others to enjoy too. During the short years of this brief life.

life. That, the teacher says, is how to live life well. Enjoy good music.

Play football. Laugh at the comedian. Rejoice in your beautiful garden. Sit down with a cup of coffee and marvel at the colour of the flowers, the birds and the trees.

[31 : 57] Laugh when the time is right for laughter. Feast with friends. When life is good, make sure you are living it with a smile on your face. That's not an un-Christian way of living.

It is the most Christian way of living. Because it looks at the world as God's good creation, made to be cultivated, cultured, and enjoyed. This world is full of good things, only made bad when we expect too much from them.

When we set them up as gods, expect them to deliver lasting satisfaction. We'll see in chapter three next week that this world is still broken.

Sin has left its ugly stain, and there will be times for mourning and weeping. But there are times too for rejoicing. And so if your life is currently full of God's good gifts, go and enjoy them.

stop trying to gain from this life, because you'll find yourself forever chasing after the wind.

[33 : 14] But accept the greatest gift of God, eternal life through His Son. Remove any fear of death, so that you can then enjoy every other gift of God in this short life.

The pleasures will all be fleeting. Nothing more than a breath. That's okay. You can still enjoy them while they last.

That is how the teacher wants us to live life. That is how to live well in God's world. world. We'll see him bring more and more detail to the landscape in the coming chapters.

This isn't all there is to living life well in God's world. Let me just repeat that. This is not all there is to living life well in God's world.

world. He will show us as we go on that it means loving God and loving our neighbor. But the first glimpses of light he gives us in this book is to enjoy what God has given you.

[34 : 23] So we'll put flesh on the bones over the coming chapters. But as a key part of it all, and for this week, go and enjoy whatever God has given you.

Let us pray as we close together. Father, forgive us for the times when we seek to find satisfaction in the fleeting pleasures under the sun.

Forgive us when we live our lives as if death didn't exist, thinking we can gain from our short lives. But we thank you that for those of us in Christ, this short life is not all there is, but only the very beginning.

We thank you for the greatest gift of all, your son Jesus Christ, who offers us living water and eternal life. Lord, help us to hold fast to him, and as he removes any fear of death from his people, as we look forward to an eternity that we get to enjoy in a new creation with you, we pray that you would help each and every one of us here to enjoy the fleeting gifts you have given us to enjoy under the sun.

We thank you that you are a merciful and gracious God who pours many gifts upon all his people. We pray that you would give us the ability to enjoy those good gifts, that we might live for your glory and your creation.

[36 : 22] In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen.