

Searching for Happiness

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[0 : 00] So it was this ancient book. You might remember if you were here last week that it started with a bang. It's not a book that pulls its punches. It opened with those stark observations. Let me give you a quick recap. Number one, that life is a breath. That we are here for a moment and then we're gone. That word vanity, remember, we heard it again in our passage. Literally, it means a breath. That it's fleeting.

Number two, we saw last week as well, there is no gain. That we can't store things up for ourselves. That life, like the sun, like the water cycle, goes round and round and ultimately we can't grasp onto things that we can keep.

It was an introduction that helped us be realistic about the world we live in. But also, it was an introduction that pointed us beyond simply this world by reminding us, thirdly, that there is more.

And we saw that, that it's as we bring God into the picture of our world that we're able to both face up to reality, be honest about the world that we live in, and also start to understand how we can live well in that.

Take seriously its limitations, but also find what we are here and what we are looking for. So there's the kind of the big themes that we're going to see running throughout this book of Ecclesiastes.

[1 : 21] A book that really asks the big questions and pushes us out of our comfort zone. And perhaps the question to start with as we look at this second section that Stuart's just read for us is this question.

What do you think would make you happy? What do you think would make you happy? What is it where we think, well, if I just had those things, or if my life looked like that, or if that was mine, well, then I would be happy.

Then life would be worth living. I'd be satisfied. You know, how would we answer that question? I wonder what starts to come to mind. What would make you happy? We're going to see this morning how the preacher, this wise, kingly figure, whose words we're learning from in Ecclesiastes.

The preacher gives us some incredibly common and incredibly contemporary examples of what people strive after and where the world thinks that happiness is found.

But here's the key. Do have a look down at verse 13, chapter 1. In those introductory verses, the preacher says this, Really, the scene here is that the preacher is looking around.

[2 : 48] He's looking at our world. Remember that phrase, under the sun last week, or here, under heaven. Under heaven, it simply means the world that we all live in, the world that all of us spend our day-to-day lives in.

And the preacher is looking around at our world, and he's saying, why is the world so unhappy? Why does nothing seem to satisfy? Again, asking the questions that so many today are asking, what is this life really all about?

And so in this passage, he uses his great wisdom to set up really a big experiment to try and find where in the world the good life, where in the world real happiness, real satisfaction is found.

I kind of have a science background, so this gets me sort of excited. You may tell me at the end if it does or not. But the preacher kind of tests a number of those areas.

He records his observations and then makes his conclusion at the end. And we're going to follow through the three main stages of his experiment, the three main areas he investigates looking for happiness, and then see what his conclusion is at the end of it.

[4 : 01] So let's dig in. Here's the first area that he tries out, the first section of his dissertation, and it is pleasure. Pleasure.

Chapter 2, verse 1, I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. And we get this section right down to verse 11 of all the ways that he just tried to have a good time, not limiting himself with anything, he says.

It's worth noting, just before we dig into those verses, the description of the preacher, right back in chapter 1, verse 1, that the son of David, king in Jerusalem, also this idea of a king who God gifted incredible wisdom.

That's the description of King Solomon. And I think most likely that is who the preacher is, that we have the words of Solomon, or at the very least they are modeled on King Solomon.

For a bit of background, Solomon was king at the height of Israel's wealth and success. And so this isn't, as we dig in here, this is not theoretical. You know, if I ever come up to you and tell you, oh, this is what it's like to have loads of money, you might well ask, well, I'm not sure if you're the best person to know that.

[5 : 22] But Solomon did know. And so Solomon's words here are worth listening to in this experiment. And these verses paint the picture then of his pleasure seeking.

Do just have a look down. Verse 3, he drinks the very best wine. Verse 4 and 5, he builds this amazing mansion with vineyards and gardens and parks all around it.

You know, he has his garden done. Verse 6, it's got a pool. This is like the house of your dreams, the kind of place that makes grand designs, look like a shed just out in the back.

Verse 7, we read he's got slaves, male and female. He doesn't need to lift a finger. Everything is done for him. He says as well, I had also great possessions of herds and flocks more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

He's not trying to kind of keep up with the neighbors here. He has got more than anyone has ever had. Verse 8, silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces.

[6 : 25] Just unbelievable wealth flowing in. And what else? He's got singers. He says he has kind of the best entertainment available, front row seats whenever he wanted them.

He had many concubines. The delight of the sons of man surrounded by the most beautiful women. And then verse 9 kind of rounds it off, this description.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. And my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them.

So here's the point again. He had everything. Everything you could imagine. Everything you could dream of. As we take a look at these verses, it doesn't take a lot of kind of translating for us, does it?

Where is the preacher seeking this pleasure? It's in the best drink. It's in the massive house. It's in all sorts of entertainment.

[7 : 28] The best parties surrounded by beautiful women. More possessions than anyone else. All the shiniest stuff. Whatever he desires. When we read that description and we think, well, what is different today?

And what the world tells us will make us happy? We realize, well, not a lot. Not a lot. We looked at Ecclesiastes at a camp over the summer with the teenagers.

We were saying that what we're kind of testing here, what the preacher is testing, is kind of like the Instagram influencer lifestyle. And I gave examples of famous people who no one had heard of.

And I felt very old. But whoever it is then that kind of comes to your mind or whoever it is that you get the updates from or is in your feed, beamed to your screens, that is flashing all the stuff that they've got.

You know, the watches, the cars, the yachts, the mansions, the holidays, the parties. That is what we're told is the good life. That is what the advertisers market saying, this is what will make you happy.

[8 : 28] And that's the same picture that is being investigated in Ecclesiastes 2. Only the preacher, Solomon, had more than anyone else, more than anyone before him.

And so having investigated that, what is his conclusion? I think here's the really important thing. It's really important we listen carefully to exactly what is said here because they're probably expecting me to say, oh, Solomon just said it was rubbish.

And yet actually Solomon doesn't say that. Now have a look at verse 10 there. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept from my heart no pleasure.

For my heart found pleasure in all my toil. And this was reward for all my toil. The preacher doesn't say, oh, these things are rubbish and I had to do them all through gritted teeth.

It was miserable. No, he says actually he found pleasure. And the preacher doesn't say these things are rubbish, but he says just like the issue of last week, the issue we'll see throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, they are a breath.

[9 : 41] They are fleeting. They cannot be held onto. Verse 11, Then I considered all that my hands had done and all the toil I had expended in doing it, all was vanity.

That word again, hevel, a breath, a striving after the wind. And there was nothing to be gained under the sun. See those two themes again from last week.

Vanity, a breath, and nothing to be gained. This first round of his experiment does not satisfy the issue that he has raised.

This pleasure couldn't be held onto. It couldn't sustain. Where did these things actually lead? How did he feel when the buzz wore off? He felt nothing.

It hadn't dealt with that gnawing emptiness. It hadn't answered the biggest questions. There was nothing gained that he could take away with it. That's such a kind of brutal conclusion, isn't it?

[10 : 40] For the people who think they've got it all, for the world's pictures of success, that ultimately there is no gain in what they're doing. And I wonder if so often deep down people know that, and that's what spurs people on, to keep on doing more and more.

Surely another party, surely another mansion, surely taking this one step further, well then it will make it feel like it's worthwhile. Then I'll have had enough. And yet, in Ecclesiastes, we read how Solomon has been to the very end of that road and found there is nothing there.

I think for all of us, this pursuit of pleasure in this way is so strong, and especially in a fairly affluent place like Haddington, this idolizing of the lifestyles, not just of the mega rich and the celebrity stars, but also the people who there will always be, who just have that bit more than us, who we so easily compare ourselves to and say, well, you know, then I'd be happy, then I'd be satisfied if I had their house, or if I had the extension done like they'd had, or if I had their kind of lifestyle or level of comfort, or if I went on the holidays that those guys were able to go into, well then I'd feel complete, then I'd be happy.

Ecclesiastes is here to tell us actually that's not true, that the people with us are comparing themselves to the people with a bit more than them, and the people with the kind of super yachts in Monaco Harbor are comparing themselves to the people with the bigger yachts just down the coast, and no one is finding ultimate satisfaction and happiness in any of those things.

And that's exactly what we should expect, because the preacher has been there and done that, he has recorded it for us in Ecclesiastes. Pleasure is not enough. It is a breath.

[12 : 42] It is here, and then it is gone, and there is no gain. So that's the preacher's investigation number one, pleasure. Let's move on to verse 12. We see here his second topic.

We see him testing this time wisdom. So here's kind of the wise life. I turned, having thought about pleasure, he now says, I turned to consider wisdom and madness.

He's already mentioned this back in chapter one. In verse 16 there he says, I acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were in Jerusalem before me. So again, he knows what he's talking about.

Here is knowing the right stuff. It is making the right choices, what it's all about. If the first kind of experiment here was that sort of Instagram lifestyle.

Secondly here is the person who perhaps has that substack account where they pile up their academic articles, or the podcast where they speak about highbrow things and how intelligent and philosophical they are.

[13 : 42] Perhaps this morning you're the kind of person who's got no time for celebrity influences, or who's been at what party. You might feel materially, you're very content. Rather you would think of yourself more as a thinker, you know, a smart person.

So when asking the big questions, well the preacher says, okay, let's put this way of life to the test then. Is wisdom what it is all about?

And what's his conclusion here? Again, this is where this book and this chapter is so great because it doesn't just deal in black and white. It doesn't oversimplify things. Verse 13, it says, Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.

The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. So the preacher says, yeah, wisdom is good. There is a way of approaching the world that takes seriously the truth that God has embedded into it, the way it's created.

To be wise in that way is better than being foolish. Some people, he says, are kind of walking around in the dark. It's like they've got their eyes closed. They're all over the place. And yet some people have their eyes open and are making better decisions.

[14 : 58] And so again, that's worth us remembering. Even if we take good out of the picture, some people are better guides than others. We should be careful who we listen to while recognizing that there is wisdom in our world.

And yet the preacher continues his conclusion in this second test. And it's a huge theme in this book. We saw it last week, but have a look at the second half of verse 14.

Having said, yes, wisdom is better than folly. He goes on to say, yet I perceived that the same event happens to them all. Then I said in my heart, what happens to the fool will happen to me also.

Then why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my head that this also is vanity for of the wise as of the fool, there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in days to come, all will have been long forgotten, how the wise dies just like the fool.

There are better ways to live. There are worse ways to live. There are wise people. There are fools. And to be wise is better than being a fool. But actually that the preacher recognizes that the same thing is going to happen to all of them, to all of us.

[16:17] They'll all end up in the grave. And ultimately, as well beyond that, he says they'll all end up forgotten. And so I think if you go through a walk, through a graveyard, and you see the stones there, you can't tell how wise was the person in this grave compared to the person in the grave next to them.

And in fact, so much of the writing on that grave will be weathered away that you won't even be able to tell who they are. There is no enduring remembrance, verse 16.

I remember we said last week that the preacher's words are like sharp goads. It says in this book, they're like a kind of a splash of ice cold water making us face reality, making us face up to our mortality.

Here they are again. More kind of cheery thoughts for a Sunday morning. But actually Ecclesiastes is saying we really need to get to grips with this. We really need to take that seriously to be able to make sense of life.

And actually it's only as we can take this seriously and make sense of this that enables us to live a happy life. We're going to be going back to that in just a minute. But let's wrap up this second phase of the experiment.

[17:28] Wisdom. The point is this. There are better ways to live. There are worse ways to live. But none of our exam results or university degrees or just kind of reputations of intelligence, no particular insight into any area of life.

You could be the leading authority on any subject you think of. Or you could be the person people always turn to when they have a question and want some advice.

And you might give great advice. And that's good. And yet again, it's not enough. It's not what life is all about. It can't be. Because as the preacher says, the final word over each and every one of us will be, here lies Alisul.

Here lies, insert your own name here. And as the preacher says, what then will our wisdom have gained us? And ultimately then, even our names will be forgotten.

If we're trying to hold on to wisdom, if that is the thing we think will give us meaning and gain, then we see that as well. It's something fleeting. That is a chasing after wind.

[18:33] So pleasure, wisdom, final stage of this experiment before we get to our ending. And again, we do have a good ending, by the way. So stick with us. The preacher points out, firstly, what doesn't work.

These paths that we so easily head down. So instead, he can point us in the right direction. And his final area of investigation is work. This is verse 18 onwards.

And really, he gives us the answer straight away here. I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

Maybe you've had, maybe you have, a job that you hate. There could be a whole list of reasons for that. Or the preacher is very specific here about why toil, why work is such a frustration to him.

And it builds on that same argument that he's just been talking about wisdom. It's because one day he'll be gone and he'll just have to leave it all to whoever comes next. And who knows what they'll be like?

[19 : 34] Who knows how good a job they'll do of it? And verse 20 and 21 seem to sum it up really. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.

This also is vanity and a great evil. If it's kind of the Instagram pictures that offer pleasure, if it's the sort of sub-stack articles of kind of wisdom, here the preacher turns to the person whose LinkedIn profile has got this incredible CV of important, significant jobs.

or the hard worker who is staying in late, a number of promotions or built a successful business from the ground up, someone good at their job, doing it with wisdom and knowledge and skill.

But again, he's saying that if we think that fulfillment is up there at the top of the career ladder or if it's found in the work that we do and if we think that's what really matters, again, the preacher says you can work your whole life for that.

You can commit countless hours into that endeavor. But, end of verse 23, this also is vanity. This is a breath.

[20 : 58] This is something that won't last. Someone will take your place and who knows what they'll do with all your hard work. Again, the preacher here is pointing out the foolishness of taking a good thing.

It is good to work hard. God made work for humans right back before the fall, before sin. God himself is described as working.

Work here is not the problem but it is taking a good thing and making it the ultimate thing. That temptation to put all of our eggs in that work basket, living to serve or sustain our work, thinking that if we just get that done then everything else will fall into place and then finding that it's a breath that we cannot hold on to.

All of us have that risk of being sucked into work as being the be-all and end-all, the place we find our security and our satisfaction, where how well our career or organization is going becomes the marker of what we're worth as a person.

That temptation is equally strong in ministry and church stuff as well. It's something that we all need to be aware of and yet the preacher is reminding us that we cannot take that career with us.

[22 : 20] All of us need to remember the result of the preacher's grand experiment that he's run through. Where is satisfaction? Where is joy? It's not through simply seeking pleasure. It's not through our wisdom.

It's not found in a life put in work above everything else. So let's move on. Let's finish then with this conclusion. Let's finish with a positive note.

What is the preacher's conclusion? Where is joy? What is the key he finds to a happy life? Again, we're not just going to give a two-minute answer that will answer everyone's questions.

We're going to see how the preacher kind of fills out this answer throughout the book. But we do see an introduction to that here. Have a look at verses 24 to the end of that chapter of chapter 2.

It says there, 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 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

[23 : 24] And you might think, hang on a minute, you've just said you hate work and now you're saying we should enjoy toil. You've just said this life of kind of pleasure of eating and drinking is a breath and now you're saying to should eat and drink.

How does that make sense? How do we square that circle? Well the key is that second sentence. This also I saw is from the hand of God.

For apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. The key then that the preacher says, having kind of analysed all the data from his grand experiment, the key is to recognise that all of these things come from God.

The things that bring us pleasure. The things that show us wisdom. The things that we work at. We've been trying to hopefully make clear all the way through that the preacher is not saying these things are rubbish.

These things are worthless. No, the preacher is saying these things are empty if that is all there is. because nothing in this world fully satisfies. Nothing in this world lasts forever.

[24 : 37] And yet God lasts forever. The key to enjoying these things then is to enter into them remembering God is the one who is over them.

Verse 25 For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. There is joy. It's not found in pleasure or wisdom or work as the priority in life.

Neither is it found in trying to reject all those things. But it's found in doing those things in a right relationship with God. Understanding that those things come from the hand of God.

And it is God who our ultimate joy and security is found in. And really I suppose that leaves us then with the question well how do we do these things in a right relationship with God?

What does that mean? How can we be as it says twice there in verse 26 the one who pleases God? How do we find ourselves in that category? And the answer to that question is to look to Jesus as the one God has given and find our joy find our ultimate joy our ultimate meaning our ultimate satisfaction in him.

[25 : 50] That our hope isn't in achieving that the lifestyle of pleasure and possessions we have beamed into us every moment our hope isn't in being the kind of reputation of having wisdom and working out the big questions in life our hope isn't in our work and what we produce none of those things will last past the grave all of those things are a breath are fleeting the preacher says but by trusting in Jesus by recognizing that he is the ultimate reality of life who will lead us into eternity who does sustain us beyond the grave that means that we can enjoy the things of this world we can work hard at the things of this world we can find purpose and goodness in the things of this world while still being able to hold them lightly if they disappear because we haven't made temporary things our everything and perhaps for some of us this morning that means we need to to repent this morning of the places where we have relegated Jesus to be a a minor player in our lives where we put other things ahead of him even though he and he alone is the eternal king maybe that repentance means making adjustments in our lives in terms of how we demonstrate what our priorities are and where we are looking for that security and joy but also having done that having Jesus in the right place living for him having our eternal security in him finding our joy in him well that is true happiness that is true satisfaction that is life to the full as Jesus says he came to bring enjoying that life in him that can never be taken away that is not fleeting that is not a breath but that is permanent and will hold us secure always that means we can also as well as that truly enjoy the gifts he gives us pleasure wisdom work done with gratitude to him done for his glory found in their right place as good gifts gifts from the ultimate eternal God who is our number one source of joy because of his love for us and the security he gives us let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that all good gifts are from you that you are the generous God who gives us everything we need that you are the abundant God who has put us in a creation where there is far more than simply what we require but there is good for us to enjoy

Lord we pray that you would forgive us for the times when we take your good gifts and we make them the ultimate thing when they displace you Lord when that happens we end up ruining what is good because it can never truly satisfy and it certainly can't sustain us into eternity instead please point us back to your son Jesus Christ who comes to bring life to the full please help us to find in him all we need and to find in him the joy of our salvation and Lord with that in place might we rightly enjoy the good gifts that you have given us not as a way to find our worth or security but from that place of love and security found in Christ and given to us as a gift Lord in that way please help us this week and beyond to live joyful and grateful lives in the places you put us being grateful for the many good things that you've given us enjoying them as gifts from you recognizing your goodness in that and using them each time to point us back to you the giver of all good things who deserves our praise and our worship and we pray that you would help us to live in light of that and for your purposes this week in Jesus name

Amen