

Jason Upchurch - Ecclesiastes 2:18-26 - Work and Death

Last week we started looking at the reality of death in Ecclesiastes. And we'll finish out the chapter on it this morning. This is death from a pagan perspective, a perspective under the sun.

I follow a few financial accounts on social media that have various perspectives. And some of the stories they relate are fascinating. But one type of story is repeated often. This is one of the recent ones I read:

"My uncle saved \$650,000 for retirement. Skipped every vacation for 30 years to do it. Same truck the entire time. Packed his own lunch every single day. Never once ate out unless it was someone's birthday. Died with the full \$650,000 still sitting there. Never got to touch a dollar of it. His three kids split it evenly. Gone in under two years. New cars. A kitchen remodel. A trip to Cancun nobody needed. He gave up three decades of small joys to leave behind something that disappeared faster than the sacrifice that built it." (@jeremyct, 8/25/26)

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear that I think we realize there's some kind of injustice there. A guy who works for 30 years never gets to benefit from his hard labor. Those who do benefit from the labor are wasteful. They don't take the money and create something better - they spend it on things that the one who earned never dreamed of spending it on.

And I think there's a sorrow when that happens. Because there's a sense in which decades of labor was squandered and wasted. The one who built it didn't enjoy it, and the ones who enjoyed it couldn't build it.

That's what Solomon is talking about here. He's talking about labor and work and inheritance and how that all plays out in our lives.

So whereas he was addressing something like a midlife crisis last week, this week he's dealing with the how we think through death in light of all that we've worked for in life. And the reality of one day giving away everything you've ever had. How do pagans think about that and how do we think through that?

Big Picture: You should enjoy the work God has given you.

The pagan view is distress and sorrow over death and passing along an inheritance. But our encouragement here is to enjoy the work God has given us.

Now here's the thing, I've really wrestled with this section for a while. Here's why: on the one hand we've seen that when Solomon uses the phrase "under the sun" he's talking from a pagan point of view. He's speaking from the point of an unbeliever. It's not his actual view. It's the view he is portraying so we understand the mindset of the unbeliever. He does this throughout the book.

But then here, he says something that I think we'd probably say is good. **Read 24-26**

So enjoy your food, your drink, and your work - this is from God. And that sounds right, doesn't it? That's good. But then he says it's also vanity. So which is it? Is it vanity? Or is it pleasing to God? I think this is something of a test for us as well.

He actually talks about work several times in the book. He does this a couple times in Ecclesiastes. **Turn to 3:9-13, 21-22, 5:18-20, 8:15, 9:7-10. Read**

Now, in all of these you probably noticed a tension. There's this encouragement to love what you do and what you eat, but there's an underlying negativity.

What do we do with that? You've heard the expression "a broken clock is right twice a day?" The idea is that someone who is normally wrong does occasionally get something correct.

I think that's what's happening here. In the main, when Solomon is giving us the view of life from under the sun it's bad and pessimistic and pagan. But occasionally even unbelievers get things right. Even really right sometimes.

And I think we'd do well to take note when they do. And I think his admonition **back** in **Vs. 2:24** to love what we do is actually a good thing.

So that's the big picture here. You should enjoy the work God has given you. There's more to it than that, but certainly not less.

I think that's what's happening **back** in **2:18-26**.

Now, before we get there let's talk about the tension he's having as he thinks through death. He doesn't want to die, he doesn't want to give away all he has to the next generation. And he does give us the main reason, but I think there's a couple other reasons here as well.

1. You view work as only toil. 18

Here's problem number 1 with work: it's when people view their work only as toil. Solomon uses that word twice here in this verse and 8 times in this paragraph. And that word is helpful for us to understand because what emphasizes is the difficulty of work.

It's used to emphasize the difficulty of work, or the trouble of work, or the labor and suffering we have to endure for work.

In fact, the word is used elsewhere in the OT to simply mean trouble.

Psalms 24:2: The wicked devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble.

In **Job 4:8** it's used of the bad guys who "plow iniquity and sow trouble..."

Sorrow and suffering **Jer 20:18:** Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

He's lamenting the difficulty of life. And that's the issue here: when people view their work as nothing but troublesome, weary, suffering hardship that's when their view tends to sour.

So let me just say, there are a lot of people who hate work, period. They just don't like it. They don't like the energy it takes, they don't like expectations and demands. They don't like their boss and they don't to be a boss.

They'd rather sit around doing nothing, playing games, doing leisurely things, whatever.

Whether they believe it or not, they despise the fact that Adam's sin causes us now to work by the sweat of our brow. Nothing comes easy.

I was talking to a friend years ago and he was telling me a story about how he and some buddies at work were commiserating after a difficult day on the job. They were all complaining, and one of his friends looked at the group and said: "Well, I guess that's why they call it **work**."

See, that's what God designed us to do: to work. Men work, women work. You need to teach your kids to work. You even need to teach your kids to love work and discipline them when they complain about work. Older folks need to work as well. Maybe not the same way as when you were younger. But one thing I often see is that people retire and they either work way more than they did than before. Or they sit around and watch CNN or Fox News until they die. All work is gone.

Now, some people are physically unable to work - that's a different issue.

But God never designed us to just sit around and do nothing til we die. He didn't design us for a sedentary life. He expects that we will work and labor. As you get older that may look different than it did when you were younger.

You remember in the OT the priests in the Temple were to work until they were 50 then there were required to be done. But in reality they never quit entirely, they worked to train and help the next generation. The same thing with warriors. When they get older they're not on the front lines anymore, but they train and lead and teach the next generation strategy.

Now, when it comes to toil - and let's be honest, work is toil sometimes - we need to understand that sometimes we're going to have more difficulty than other times. Every job has its seasons. Some of you men have employers where your company goes in cycles. Long days one season, shorter the next. Harder hours one season, shorter the next. There's pressure and difficulty sometimes.

Same with you ladies. There are seasons and cycles in your lives that are more difficult and less difficult.

Sometimes work is hard because of pain. Your body is broken or aches or doesn't work like it should. Sleepless nights, poor health.

Maybe your toil doesn't feel worthwhile because you can't see the bigger picture of why you're doing what you're doing.

Maybe you want more in life, but you're afraid to go get it. You're afraid to try harder, take risks and do the thing you really want.

These are all factors that cause people to hate their toil.

2. The fruit of your labor will ultimately be left to someone else. Read 18-21

So this is sort of the cascade effect. He's suffering and struggling to work, and then at the end of it all it's all going to go to someone else. Listen, news flash, your wealth and toil is going to someone else one day.

And you don't get to decide how they use it. You can hope they use it wisely. You can hope they invest it or use it for college or a house or a business or whatever. But you won't know and can't know.

You can put it into trusts or dole it out little by little. You can give a lump sum. You can give real estate or stocks or cold hard cash. But at the end of the day there's absolutely no telling what they'll do with that money.

And that's the main issue Solomon has here. He's worked so hard all his life for this wealth, this treasure and now he has to give it away. And it could be squandered.

1 Tim 6:8: we brought nothing into the world, and cannot take anything out of the world.

That's a truism. You started with nothing, you end with nothing. It's like playing real life Monopoly. Everyone starts with no money, then you get some money, over the course of the game some people get more money than others. Depending on how the game goes you sometimes you get more sometimes you get less and then the game is over. You put all the pieces back in the box, all the money back in the box. The end.

This is why the Bible says we're stewards of God's money. We handle it for a time but at some point we're done and we're required to give an accounting of our stewardship.

Job: naked I came, and naked I return. So what you leave behind will be given to someone else. And they're either going to be wise or foolish with what you've gained.

This is why you need to have a will. You don't need to give everyone equally. Maybe some family members are foolish and their foolishness would be magnified. Some are wise and their wisdom would be magnified. You don't always know and that's the tough part.

And listen, either way very few people are going to appreciate your labor like you do.

When we earn money, what we're doing is storing our labor. That's what money is: it's a store of value usually represented by labor.

So when I pull out a little green bill that says \$20 what I'm showing you is that I have stored up about 1 hour worth of unskilled labor. Some of you guys have a better skill set and you can acquire more dollars. That's great.

So remember the opening story of the guy who saved \$650,000? If you divide that by \$20 per hour, it's like 32,500 hours of unskilled labor or 15.5 years worth. That's a lot of labor potential stored up. Which is why Solomon is lamenting the reality that his wealth - the things for which he toiled - could fall into the wrong hands.

And we know verses like **Prov 13:22**: A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, and the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.

And obviously that's true. It's good to leave an inheritance to your children and grandchildren. I think the principle is more that righteous are concerned about coming generations and how to bless them.

But just remember that the issue Solomon is taking here is that they don't always do good things with it.

So you only view work as toil, the fruit of your work is left to someone else.

3) Some people never actually enjoy the fruit of their work. **Read 22-23**

So here's what happening: he knows he's going to have to leave his wealth to someone else, but he's coming to the realization that in all that work and difficulty and pain he hasn't enjoyed any of the fruit.

What does **he** have from that? From the life of toil and pain? Nothing. **Read 23**

He's filled up a lifetime of sorrow, a lifetime of beaten body. Even when he's home in his bed there's no rest.

It's the guy who worked a hard job his whole life to finally retire and do some fun things and dies of a heart attack 2 months later. I actually knew a guy that did that. Had all these retirement dreams. Dead.

Or the stay at home mom who has all these dreams of doing things, if she just wasn't nursing or overwhelmed with laundry or doing school and then the kids are gone and she's old.

It's the saying that the days are long but the years are short.

And I think if we're honest, a lot of people struggle with this. They don't actually like what they're doing day to day. They toil, it's hard. There's little joy, little laughter, things are hard. They look back to when times were easier or more enjoyable. Or they look forward to when things will be better because they'll have more time, more energy more money.

But in the here and now it's toil and work. Days filled with sorrow and vexation and restlessness. And it all feels like vanity.

How do we understand this?

4) You need to enjoy what you do. **Read 24-25**

Now, remember this is still Solomon with his pagan hat on. He'll call this vanity in the next few verses. But I don't think he's entirely wrong. This is where the broken clock is right twice a day.

If you know that you're going to die and you can't take it with you. And if you know that all the things you've worked for might go to a fool. Then one thing you should be doing is ensuring that you find enjoyment in the routine things of life. The labor of life.

Listen, if you work from age 20-70 that's about 100,000 hours of work. You might as well enjoy what you're doing.

I remember when I was the ripe old age of 24 and I was at a job that paid well but was super stressful. I couldn't imagine a life different than what I had. But I took a leap and changed jobs and it was amazing. Made better money, better boss, more flexible hours, whole gig.

I've also done the opposite. I went from one job to a worse job. Got laid off and had to go back and ask for the old job back. It happens. But listen, you're going to be in this thing for a while so you might as well enjoy what you're doing.

If you're student working - might as well enjoy the classes you're taking. If you're a stay at home mom, you might as well build in enjoyable things for you and the kids. If you're early in your career set yourself up so that you can have an enjoyable life.

If you're late in your career or retired, you might as well enjoy the days you have. I mean, put it a different way: God doesn't want you to slog it out the rest of your life in misery and sorrow. I've met a lot of guys who are my age - middle age - and they think they're just stuck. They can't do anything else, can't take chances because they're sort of committed to mediocrity and misery in life.

Solomon says go do something you enjoy.

God did design us to work. That's the exact reason he made us: to take dominion over the world, to fill the world and subdue it. That work is often hard, we do it by the sweat of our brow. There's labor and difficulty.

But he also made us to enjoy his creation while we do that. God doesn't want us to be miserable our whole lives.

We could cite **Phil**: rejoice always, and again I say rejoice. And sometimes that's citing as a "just get over it and be happy kind of verse." And sometimes we need to dig deep and stay where we're at and fulfill our obligations. We don't need to change where we are, we just need to change how we're doing it.

But I think overall this is great advice. Paul says in **1 Tim 6**: if we have food and clothing with these we will be what? Content. Do you have good food in your belly? Do you have clothes on? Then we can be content.

And what Solomon is getting to here is that if we can make it so that we're not just content but truly enjoy those things. **Read 24-25**

This is from the hand of God. Listen, if you're at work - whatever that is for you - and you're enjoying what you do and thankful to the Lord - give him praise. This is his good provision for you.

When you sit down for dinner tonight and the food is good and you're sipping on your wine or beer or iced tea or whatever and you're enjoying it. Praise God. It's as though he's handed it to you.

And if you're not enjoying his provision, are there things you can do to change it?

So if you're looking for a sign for you need to make some changes in you life to make things better so that you can enjoy things more, here's the wisest man ever to live saying that there should be joy in your life. Maybe you need to change some things up or reevaluate some things.

5) Sinners ultimately don't prosper. Read 26

So if you please God - and you only please God through faith in Jesus. Everyone else is a child of wrath. So it's Christians who please God through faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

If you please God he's given us wisdom and knowledge and joy. We're God's children and God wants his children to be well taken care of.

Don't you want your kids taken care of? Do you want your kids to be miserable all the time? No of course not. Sometimes they have to do hard things. There's work involved in their life. But even that work isn't meant to be burdensome and vexation. It's to train them to properly care for God's world.

The sinner - the unbeliever - doesn't get that advantage. They may have happiness and joy for a while. They may have more stuff, better income, bigger house, whatever for a time. But ultimately it will escape their hands. Either in this life or in the one to come.

That's the true vanity. Being an unbeliever - someone who hates God and refuses to follow the Lord - having all the best things in life and yet ultimately forfeiting it all.

Jesus said: What does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his what? Soul. The irony is that they'll forfeit the world too. And when they do, it's often the righteous who gain.

Listen, enjoy what you do. Where you're at in life. If you need to make some changes, do some reevaluation now is the time. Are there seasons of difficulty and pain? Yes. Are some people's lives harder than others? Yes.

But our good Father doesn't just want us to suffer. He wants us to enjoy his world. Ultimately so he gets praise.

Pray