

Our Pleasant God-given Duty
(Ecclesiastes 2 - 9)

Ecclesiastes teaches that most of what people do makes no sense. It makes sense to the people who are doing it, but only because they are not really thinking.

To Ecclesiastes, it makes no sense. People pour their lives into things, as if there was a certain guarantee or promise. But there is no guarantee or promise, so they are wasting their time. Here are some examples of promises people think are true, but they are not:

"If I could only have more pleasure for myself, more fun, more things that make me feel good, then I'd be happy." It makes sense, doesn't it? Sure. But it is not true.

"If I work hard enough, I'll get richer." "If I work hard enough, I'll have enough to slow down and enjoy life." "If I work hard enough, I'll be able to save my children from having to work so hard." "If I have enough money, life will be good."

Any one of those are sometimes true, but as a reason to work hard, says the Teacher, they are empty promises. Many people who work hard get none of these things. Many.

"If I am wise enough, I can make sure nothing really bad happens to me." "If I am wise enough, I will be respected." "If I am wise enough, my life will not be like the lives of fools." These make sense, don't they? Sure. But they're often not true. If they are true, it's usually only for a short time, and then the bottom falls out.

These promises are not true because life itself is *hebel*, a mist and a vapour. People work for these things, but life ends before people get what they worked for.

And, what we work for itself is *hebel*, a mist. We never quite get our hands on it. We always need just a bit more of whatever promise we believe, and *then* life will be good.

These things bring the Teacher pain. These things *should* be promises, they *should* be guarantees, but they are *not*. It is grievous. The Teacher despairs over what he sees.

This book is in the Bible to warn us about what is not worth doing. So what *is* worth doing? Eccl 2:2 - "*I wanted to see what was good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.*" What's actually worthwhile?

So, let's see what kind of things do *not* keep their promise; and what things are *hebel*, just mist or vapour: "vanity;" "meaningless," "useless," depending on your translation.

Pleasure is Hebel Eccl 2:1-11 [read]

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

He tried wine as an experiment. Not just for relief or pleasure, but to see if much wine made life worthwhile. It did not. He encourages wine as part of a normal hard-working life – “drink your wine with a joyful heart” he says in ch. 9. But it cannot be what makes life good.

He had wine, women, and song. He had wealth. He built parks and gardens, houses and pools. All the building projects in 2:4-9 are places that would bring pleasure by being there. He built his own luxury hotels, many of them, incredible places.

He got everything his eyes desired and his heart wanted. The verdict is in the beginning and at the end - 2:1,11 - it was all *hebel*, mist, vapour; it amounted to nothing. It left him empty. But don't miss the second half of v10: "my heart took delight *in all my work*, and this was the reward for all my labour."

The houses, parks, gardens, and pools brought him no pleasure once they were done. *But*, he really did enjoy *building* all this stuff. **And that enjoyment was his reward.**

Wisdom is Hebel Eccl 2:14-16

The wise person dies the same as the fool, and the wise person is remembered no longer the fool. 2:15b - "This too is *hebel*, mist, vapour."

Eccl 3:10-13 give another reason that pursuing wisdom is an empty promise: God has put eternity in the hearts of men. People know that there is a big picture, there’s more than

we can see under the sun. But people can't figure it out. They know there is an answer, but they can't find it.

So, since God made everything beautiful in its time, enjoy the beauty, and do what is right. 3:12 says, "*there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good while they live.*" This is the gift of God. There is nothing better (nothing more good).

9:13-16 - *I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.*

A sad little story, and another reason why wisdom is over-rated. Wisdom is useful and powerful, but be careful what you assume it will bring to you. It did not bring this man very much.

Work is Hebel Eccl 2:17-25

I read this text in last week's sermon. In 2:17-23 the word "meaningless," *hebel*, occurs 4 times. In Ecclesiastes, work is painful. And, it is also the most regular source of joy, as we saw in vv24-25: *A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*

The satisfaction and enjoyment of work are a direct gift of God. In Ecclesiastes, the best is to do what is right, and to taste the enjoyment of life and work as it comes. Because this enjoyment and satisfaction come from God, it is the pleasant duty of people to enjoy these things. It is our pleasant God-given duty.

Achievement is Hebel Eccl 4:4-6

All toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

V4 - "everything comes from envy." I think this is not true of me, but maybe it is. If everyone around me had a smaller dumpier house than I do, I'd more likely be content with mine. If everyone around me had a vehicle that was older and in worse shape, I'd more likely be content.

Fill in the blanks - clothes, tools, holidays, toys of any kind, for children and adults both.

Here's another example: suppose you work at something you do well, and you find satisfaction in it. Then someone comes along who is good at the very same thing you are good at, in fact, they are better than you at that very thing. Your job, if it is a job, isn't threatened. You can keep doing what you do.

But people around can see that this other person is actually better than you at the very thing you saw as yours. That takes some of the joy out of our lives. We don't handle that very well. Envy.

4:5 says "don't be lazy - it'll be the end of you." 4:6 says, "but don't work too hard, either. Slow down, relax. It's better."

Promotion is *Hebel* - Eccl 4:13-16

These verses tell another story. Everyone was so happy when a foolish old king was finally off the throne, and the poor but wise youth was king instead. Everyone followed him. Did the poor wise youth have it made? No. Once people forgot what the foolish old king had been like, they did not want the new king either. They wanted someone else to be king.

Promotions are *hebel*, meaningless. They are a mist, a vapour.

My dad was a shop teacher for many years, most of those he was the department chair of the industrial arts, as the shop program was called in those days. A few times he was offered the position of vice principal of our high school, most of 1000 students.

He would tell us about the offer at supper. We were young, we thought he should take it. It was obviously a promotion, and his pay would increase. But he would say, "I'm not taking this. Here in the shops, I do what I like and what I want. In that office others will tell me what to do and I don't want that job. I'm staying where I am." After a few times, they did not bother to offer it to him anymore.

I like that story, and I have made similar decisions myself. Not every promotion is bad, not at all. That's not the point. It's *not* good just because it's a promotion. That in itself does not make it good. Don't count on what promotion will bring you.

Wealth is *Hebel* Eccl 5:10-20

Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them?

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep.

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit. Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. This too is a grievous evil:

As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind? All their days they eat in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

If the goal is to have just a little more money, we will never have enough. The more we own, the more people there are that live off our money. The joy of the owner is to watch it happen!

The repeated advice of the book of Ecclesiastes is to find satisfaction in eating and drinking and working.

5:19 - Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.

There are two separate gifts from God here: one, God gives someone wealth and possessions, and two, God gives them the ability to enjoy them and be content. That's a second gift. God gives some the first but not the second.

Ecclesiastes respects money. Wealth solves many problems. Having enough money helps life in different ways, but it's no use without the ability to enjoy it.

5:10 is about the person who *loves* money and *loves* wealth, that is, the person who *arranges their life* to have more money, more wealth. People who arrange their lives to have more money and wealth are pursuing some kind of satisfaction, some kind of enjoyment, *and they will never get it*. They simply will never get that satisfaction and enjoyment. That promise is really a lie.

If a person has enough money and wealth, and has the ability to enjoy it, two separate gifts, *the pleasant duty of that person before God is to enjoy it and be happy in their work.*

Why the Promises we Live by are False: 9:11-12

I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

Too many big things are beyond our control. Our plan makes sense, but too often something else happens and it wrecks our plan. Bad things happen, and they come suddenly, unexpectedly. This certainly includes unexpected death.

Our Joyful Task – 9:7-10a

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, because we don't know anything about tomorrow.

Don't ignore a chance for enjoyment or satisfaction on the basis of a promise that is false. Enjoy the common pleasures. This is our pleasant duty, our joyful task from God. Amen.

PRAYER: God, we're not used to hearing things like this. You have shown us the way forward. You are still giving these ordinary chances for satisfaction and enjoyment. You have richly provided us with many things to enjoy. Show us our pleasant duty, our joyful task. Thank you for the clarity of this book. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.