

Ecclesiastes 2 – Living the Dream?

Well it's nice to be back with you, do keep that very happy passage open as we look at it together! We'll focus on chapter 2 which we've just had read, but we'll refer back a little to the end of chapter one. Let's pray before we start.

PRAY

I had a coursemate at university who had quite a unique response to the question: how are you? You'd ask him "How are you?" and he'd respond "Living the dream". It's strange isn't it, for a British person to respond like that, particularly a millennial! Sounds too positive, not very genuine.

And now, I don't think we're very likely to say something like that, at least not honestly. I actually think my coursemate was being sarcastic most of the time as well. Particularly as millennials – don't try and tell me I'm Gen Zed, 1997 I qualify – we like to be a bit down about life, it's the millennial style of humour. And as I was reading Ecclesiastes 2, I felt that the same sort of thing was coming through here.

"This too is meaningless" "So I hated life." He even talks to himself and says how hard it is to sleep at night. It seems the writer – maybe Solomon, maybe not - got the spirit of 2026 in him well before its time!

Listen to this, as one of our own poets has said – "When I was a child, every single thing could blow my mind. Soaking it all up for fun, but now I only soak up wine. They say to play hard, you work hard, find balance in the sacrifice. And yet I don't know anybody who's truly satisfied." That's Adele, if you don't know it.

The 'teacher' of Ecclesiastes is similarly blunt and realistic about life, but this is not a contemporary song, or a philosophical piece of writing. This is God's word, written to teach us, and this 'teacher' goes on a journey in this chapter. He tries out 'living the dream', and what we're going to do today, is we're going to look at that dream, and see what he learns about it. There are two big things he learns, and then these revelations lead him to a new perspective. Two revelations and a new perspective.

1) A meaningless quest v1-11

And the first thing he sees is that this idea of living the dream is a meaningless quest. A meaningless quest. We've skipped a few verses at the end of chapter one, let me summarise. Basically, the teacher goes to the library, tries to learn all that he can, studies hard, becomes wise. And then realises that there's not much point in that. It's all a chasing after the wind, because being clever actually makes you pretty sad. v18 "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

The phrase, "Chasing after the wind" comes up a lot in the book, along with the key word 'meaningless', and they basically have the same meaning, at heart. The Hebrew word translated meaningless is "Hevel", and it could be translated "Vanity", "Futile" or even "Vapour". For the Romanian speakers, "Deșertăciune" or emptiness. And the repeated

phrase “Chasing after the wind” kind of describes it in a vivid way. It’s like trying to catch the wind with a net. It’s like going outside on a cold day and trying to catch your dragon breath. You can’t do it! It just disappears.

And that’s how the teacher feels when he’s living the dream. Not for want of trying! He’s tried wisdom in chapter one, now in chapter two he turns to pleasure. He tries laughter, gets out the old joke books, has a chuckle. Then he goes down the pub, goes to the wine bars, takes a trip to Moldova and goes to visit the largest wine cellars in Europe. He calls in the contractors and builds a big house, plants a garden worthy of the national trust, fills his house with silver, and gold, and sheep and cattle, hires a choir to sing for him, fills his life with women, delight and pleasure and... v11 “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.”

It’s all a meaningless quest. There’s no point. It doesn’t satisfy. It’s vain, meaningless, and empty. Note that he doesn’t switch off his brain and go into a trance like he’s a twenty-two year old at a rave, v3 his mind is still guiding him with wisdom, v9 his wisdom stays with him. How he thinks this is true when he seems to be getting many wives I’m not sure, that doesn’t sound all that wise, but the point is, he’s very calculated in the way he does this. He’s not given up and resigned himself to hedonistic pleasure-seeking. No he’s on a quest to find meaning in life, and it’s all pointless.

v2 he asks a really strange question. “What does pleasure accomplish?” What do you mean? That’s almost not the point of pleasure right? It’s not about accomplishment.

The Chisinau marathon in Moldova takes place in the centre of the city, and it is literally going back and forth along the main road. You finish where you started. You’ve just run 42 kilometres to go nowhere. I’ve never done it, but if I did, I would do it for pleasure! The whole question of what does pleasure accomplish seems not to make any sense. It’s “just for fun”. The point of pleasure is pleasure.

But on another level, I can see what he’s saying, can’t you? Pleasure, joy, fun, it’s there for a bit, but it doesn’t last. A good film, a bit of comedy, a drink, a relationship – it might make me happy for a bit, but I’m not going to feel that rush forever. It’s fleeting, it’s like chasing after the wind.

Let me tell you a lie that Moldovans believe. Life’s great in England. Many Moldovans look West and see a promised land where all their problems go away. For an average Moldovan, every one of us here is living the dream. We in the West have a responsibility to show the world that that’s just not true. Yes there are great things about our country, I love the UK. But life doesn’t consist in having access to Amazon, or a train network that goes faster than a horse and cart, or Cadbury’s chocolate (all things that don’t exist in Moldova by the way). If we base our life on the pursuit of joy and happiness – whether we live in Moldova, Huntingdon, or a penthouse in New York – we will be sorely disappointed. It’s a meaningless quest.

That’s lesson number one.

2) A dead end v12-23

Lesson number two, it's all a dead end. Why? Because the end is death! Life is a one way road, and we all know where it's going, don't we? One day, we won't be here any longer. v16 "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!" It doesn't matter how much learning you engage in, how many degrees you get, how many letters they put after your name, the last word will be the year of your birth, followed by the year of your death. (Matt Gurtler, BA, MA, 1997-...) One day there'll be a year there

It's true on a worldwide scale. The wise dies just like the fool. There was once a tudor entertainer, so around 500 years ago, he was known as the great stab proof man. He used to wear a stab proof vest, filled with little packets of animal blood, and he'd stab himself with a dagger, let the blood flow, but be completely unharmed! One night, he forgot to put on the vest, and just died. What a fool, right? (Thanks to Horrible Histories for that one).

At the other end of the spectrum, we have Albert Einstein, developer of the theory of relativity which I don't understand, PhD, instrumental in the development of nuclear energy, quantum theory, which I also don't understand. He even has an element named after him. What do they have in common? Albert and Einstein, and the Great Stabproof man. Yep, they're both dead. "Like the fool, the wise too must die!"

And there are far more wise and foolish people beyond them who have been completely forgotten, lost to the history books. Just think about your family. You probably know your parents' names, probably your grandparents' too. Do you know who your great grandparents are or were? I don't. What about your great great grandparents? How far back can you go?

"The days have already come when both have been forgotten." No matter how hard we try to be remembered, we won't last forever. It's all a dead end. That's what the teacher discovered, and it led him to a pit of true millennial despair, v17 "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

And then he goes on to talk about handing over the fruits of his labour to those who come after him v18 "I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless."

For the teacher, the one who comes after him is the next king of Israel. I don't think he's being selfish here, saying "Why should my kids have an easy life when I had to work for it?" No, I think he's being realistic about the state of humanity and understanding that if he builds a strong nation, then he dies and leaves it to a foolish descendant, that descendant could in one year undo what it took him decades to build! Not just for him, but for the whole nation of Israel.

If the 'teacher' of Ecclesiastes is Solomon, then this verse is almost prophetic! Solomon's son Rehoboam refused to listen to wise advice, and as a result the kingdom of Israel – which had a golden age under Solomon – was torn in two. What a waste! Meaningless, meaningless!

So two lessons. An attempt to live the dream is not only a meaningless quest, but it's also a dead end, because it ends with death. But in v24-26 the teacher has a new perspective.

Gift not Gain v24-26

And what he says is "Actually when you know God, everything works out alright, and it turns out life isn't meaningless after all. And that fixes all of your problems."

No he doesn't say that at all, does he? Let me read from v24

"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? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

The new perspective we'll get to in a minute is gift not gain. I'll explain what I mean in a bit. One clear thing here, this is no atheist. This man is a believer in the God of the Bible, and he still feels this utter despair.

Being a Christian does not suddenly make life easy, or make it all make sense. That may be what you want to hear, but it's not true. If you're not a Christian here this morning, it is really important that you come to Christ, but it won't solve all your problems. You won't wake up tomorrow morning with everything in your life sorted out.

No, the reason to come to Jesus is not because all our earthly problems will be solved, but because our biggest problem, the problem of our separation from our heavenly Father, is solved by Jesus at the cross. So if you're not a Christian here this morning, I really want to invite you to see who Jesus is, and what he offers you. It won't solve all your earthly problems just like that, but Jesus does bring all who trust in him into a perfect relationship with God the Father, and one day, all of this vanity, emptiness, meaninglessness *will* be taken away.

But for now, even for those of us who are Christians, we will sometimes feel like the teacher here. The chapter concludes with the emptiness remaining. "This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." James 5v14, in the New Testament says a similar thing. "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." That's what life is in this world, under the sun. Broken, aching, meaningless, longing for something more. And if we try and pretend that our faith is going to change that in the here and now, we're lying to ourselves.

A few weeks ago, I felt this way. Life in Moldova seemed hard, I didn't feel like we were making any difference. I just asked myself: "What's the point? This just goes on, week after week, nothing new. Why am I even here in Moldova?" And sometimes, Christian, you will

feel like that too. Mental health difficulties are real, and none of us are immune from them. And I think that – among other things - Ecclesiastes teaches us that Christians can feel like this too.

This is Graeme Goldsworthy:

“[Ecclesiastes] is a rebuke to the false optimism which comes from a simplistic view of wisdom’s goal. If he had managed to convey a sense of resolving the tensions he would have failed in his task. He sets God’s sovereign will and purpose over against the apparent vanity of all things. But he will not give in to despair... He also warns us against something more subtle than blatant secular atheism, and that is trite religiosity.”

“Everything’s ok, because I know Jesus.” may sound and feel good. But is it true when we’re in the depths of depression, or when we’re facing the death of a loved one, or our own death. Do we always feel that way? I don’t think we do. Sometimes, we feel like everything’s meaningless, and this side of the new creation, we always will. We can look forward to the day when every tear is wiped away and the vanity is taken away for good. But we can also join the teacher in his new perspective. Gift not gain

v24 “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.”

David Gibson points out that this sounds very much like “Eat, drink, and be merry” – the creed of the nihilists. Why not get smashed there’s no point to anything anyway? But note the difference. The teacher isn’t saying “Eat and drink and find satisfaction, because that’s all there is”, he’s saying do those things because, that’s *what* there is, and it is from the hand of God.

The secret to living in God’s world, in this world where there is emptiness, and meaninglessness, and chasing after the wind, vapour, is to understand that good things are a gift, not gain. Gift not gain.

It’s not “might as well enjoy it”. No, the secret is to stop looking for satisfaction in the gifts that God gives, and start enjoying them as just that. Gifts. The essence of sin, is taking a good thing from God and making it into an ultimate thing for our own gain. That doesn’t mean it’s not good. That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy running a marathon, or let’s be honest eating cake, or listening to music, or watching the sunset.

Will you find ultimate joy in those things? No. But they are good gifts from God, enjoy them. That’s the new perspective. Find joy in wisdom, knowledge, pleasure, work, because these are gifts from God.

Conclusion

There is nothing in this world that will leave you truly satisfied. As Adele said. Looking for meaning by living the dream is not only a meaningless quest, but it’s also a dead end.

If you don't know Jesus this morning, do you feel that? Do you see that? Stop looking for meaning in this life, and come into a relationship with God, who will one day bring all the pain and complexity of this world to an end, and restore creation to how it should be.

If you are a Christian, don't expect life to be easy breezy. Let this book, Ecclesiastes, protect you from trite religiosity. Look forward to the new creation, and view life with a new perspective, receiving good things from God as a gift.

Let's pray.