

Coming Back Empty

6.28.26

Message 2

So What?

Open

A. I've been to the mountain top, and it's ok.

1. I was listening to a very successful pastor tell his story.
2. He had everything I'm told to strive for.
3. Big church, in a big city. Thousands of people. Popular books. Interviews and opportunities. He had all the measures of success for an American pastor.
4. And when asked about his success, he used that phrase:
5. I've been to the mountain top, and it's ok.

B. That describes many of us, and it describes Solomon.

1. You do the thing.
2. You get the achievement.
3. You win the award.
4. You earn the pin.
5. And it's a let-down, disappointing, and kind of empty.

C. It was a good thing, a noble pursuit.

1. And it wasn't what you hoped or thought it should be.
2. In our passage today, we see this in the Preacher's pursuit.
3. He explores wisdom, work, pleasure, and possessions; it is all "Hevel".
4. Hevel is this Hebrew word for futile, empty, vanity, or meaningless.
5. Solomon had been to the mountain top, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "So what?"

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26 (NLT)

¹² I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. ¹³ I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. ¹⁴ I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.

¹⁵ What is wrong cannot be made right.

What is missing cannot be recovered.

¹⁶ I said to myself, “Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.” ¹⁷ So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind.

¹⁸ The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief.

To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

Chapter 2

The Futility of Pleasure

I said to myself, “Come on, let’s try pleasure. Let’s look for the ‘good things’ in life.” But I found that this, too, was meaningless. ² So I said, “Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?” ³ After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.

⁴ I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. ⁷ I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

⁹ So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. ¹⁰ Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. ¹¹ But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.

The Wise and the Foolish

¹² So I decided to compare wisdom with foolishness and madness (for who can do this better than I, the king?). ¹³ I thought, “Wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness. ¹⁴ For the wise can see where they are going, but fools walk in the dark.” Yet I saw that the wise and the foolish share the same fate. ¹⁵ Both will die. So I said to myself, “Since I will end up the same as the fool, what’s the value of all my wisdom? This is all so meaningless!” ¹⁶ For the wise and the foolish both die. The wise will not be remembered any longer than the fool. In the days to come, both will be forgotten.

¹⁷ So I came to hate life because everything done here under the sun is so troubling. Everything is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

The Futility of Work

¹⁸ I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. ¹⁹ And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! ²⁰ So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world.

²¹ Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn’t worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. ²² So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? ²³ Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.

²⁴ So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat or enjoy anything apart from him? ²⁶ God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please him. But if a sinner becomes wealthy, God takes the wealth away and gives it to those who please him. This, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind.

Our Favorite Idol

A. Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived.

1. He was given a supernatural amount of wisdom.
2. He was the richest King of Israel.
3. But when we look for gain and meaning apart from God, we end up worshipping our favorite idol... Ourselves.

B. Notice all of the “I” statements.

I the teacher and king

I lived

I devoted

I discovered

I observed

I said

I am wiser

I am greater

I set out to learn

I learned...

C. It is appropriate to write in the first person, and to say “I”.

1. But Solomon’s pursuit of gain was divorced from his pursuit of God.

2. When we are not pursuing Jesus, we are pursuing self.

3. There are only two pursuits, two things we can chase.

4. We can chase after God, and notice what happens when we do!

Deuteronomy 4:29 (CSB) ²⁹ But from there, you will search for the LORD your God, and you will find him when you seek him with all your heart and all your soul.

Proverbs 8:17 (CSB) ¹⁷ I love those who love me, and those who search for me find me.

5. If we chase after anything else, Solomon says it is like “chasing after wind.”

Chasing After Wind

A. Thursday morning, I was writing this sermon on my back porch.

1. I was trying to describe “chasing after wind” and took a moment to notice the light breeze that was blowing.

a. Birds singing.

b. Squirrels jumping in the grass.

- c. The dew was glistening.
 - d. The light breeze on my face.
- 2. I can tell you about it, but I have nothing to show for it.
 - a. For a minute, it was nice and comfortable.
 - b. For a minute, it was calm.
 - c. And then it was gone.
- 3. I cannot give you the wind because I don't have it.
- 4. I had to write about the breeze while I was still sitting on the porch, because even the memory of the experience fades almost as quickly as it begins.
- 5. The Idiom or image behind the phrase Chasing wind can also be described as Shepherding the wind.¹
 - a. If you are shepherding sheep, you can show sheep.
 - b. But I cannot shepherd the wind.
 - c. It's completely futile, vain, and impossible.

B. Chasing the wrong things feels just like that.

- 1. It's over just as quickly as it began, and you are left wanting more.
- 2. The Law of Diminishing returns states that for me to feel that same level of pleasure, I will have to have something even better the next time.
- 3. Everything is never enough; I naturally want and need more.

C. The Teacher 4 pursuits that seemed to offer a lot of gain, but were actually empty.

¹ UBS notes So Qoheleth is saying here that, having seen what people are doing in the world, he concluded that all such activity is like trying to "shepherd the wind." The idiom describes something impossible to achieve.¹

Four areas of Emptiness.

1. Pleasure is Empty: 2:1-3

Ecclesiastes 2:3 (NLT)

³ After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.

A. What a picture: while seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness.

1. Solomon's pursuit led him to overindulge in alcohol.
2. Notice the connection: I decided to cheer myself with wine.
3. While seeking wisdom, I clutched/grabbed/embraced/imbibed in foolishness.

B. Why?

1. Because he pursued the only happiness ordinary people find.
2. More than being drunk, this points us to a truth: We overindulge as a form of comfort and happiness.
3. It can be food, alcohol, drugs, sexual release, shopping, and a huge list.
4. Pleasure offers us an experience, a destination, and we realize that we never get there.

C. When wisdom is used solely to grasp pleasure, we find ourselves clutching foolishness.

1. We exchange truth for a lie.
2. We invest ourselves in something and find out that it was a mirage and a scam.
3. Pleasure, pursued for its own sake, is Hevel.

2. Possessions are Empty

Ecclesiastes 2:4–8 (NLT)

⁴ I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. ⁷ I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than

any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

A. I love stuff.

1. I love having it, I love the pursuit of it, I really to love it.
2. I like my house, my vehicles, my guitars, my stuff.
3. There is nothing wrong with owning possessions.
4. Do you know why I say that? Because of the commandment, thou shall not steal.

B. But possessions are meaningless by themselves.

1. They cannot provide happiness.
2. They always leave us wanting more.
3. They always provide a diminishing return.
4. Possessions, no matter how grand, are hevel.
5. Possessions can provide pleasure, but not purpose.

3. Wisdom is Empty

A. All throughout, Solomon talks about wisdom.

1. Here's the sad thing:
2. God gave Solomon real wisdom, but Solomon didn't think that was enough.
3. He wanted to know what it was like to live in the world.

B. The Hebrew word for wisdom (*hochma*) is a broad term. Here it refers to what human beings can learn about the world without any special revelation from God.²

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 38.

1. God gave Solomon godly wisdom, but he didn't want God's special revelation.
2. He wanted what he could touch, explore, discover, and learn.
3. He wanted information apart from the relationship.
4. Sounds like the Garden. God gave Adam and Eve real life, but they wanted something else.

C. Time and again, God offers to us what is most valuable, and we turn it down.

1. We don't want what God offers, and we don't want it His way.
2. We want life on our terms, but the life we pursue is meaningless.
3. Life feels like we are chasing wind: we are busy, and frantic, and have nothing to show for it.

4. Work is Empty

A. Most of us find value in work.

1. Work is part of the design, not the fall.
2. God created us to work.
3. But notice Solomon's experience: 2:9-11

⁹ So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. ¹⁰ Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. ¹¹ But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere.

B. He found great pleasure in work, but it was meaningless.

1. Work is a good thing.
2. Earning a living is a good thing.
3. Producing is a good thing.
4. But when it is separated from God's purpose, it is meaningless.

C. Our job and vocation were never meant to give us meaning or purpose.

1. Every one of us needs a sense of purpose.
2. We need to know and believe that what we are doing matters.
3. That has probably always been a human need, but I believe it is far more important today than ever before.

D. It wasn't that long ago that the goal for a person was to go to school, get a good job, settle down, raise a family, and live a good moral life.

1. Somewhere along the way, we introduced a new concept: The belief that every person is called to change the world.
2. Everyone is a world changer.

The hero of their own story.

We are all Davids out to kill Goliaths.

We are asked at a young age, what do you want to be when you grow up?

My generation was astronauts, doctors, and professional athletes.

Today? Social Media influencer. 57% of Gen Z would be an influencer if given the chance.

3. None of these things is bad or evil.
4. But meaning can never be found by what we accumulate or do.

Differences between Value and Meaning

A. Value signifies function

1. Meaning is why.
2. Value shows up on your balance sheets.
3. Meaning shows up on your face and countenance.
4. Meaning connects to the soul, while value connects to utility. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

B. Notice this definition!

“Meaning is the inherent good something possesses. Value is how much, or how well, you can use something. Something is meaningful if it can be satisfying all by itself. Something is valuable when useful for something else.”³

1. Did you notice: meaningful is if it can be satisfying all by itself.
2. And by itself, pleasure, wisdom, work, family, and possessions are not satisfying by themselves.
3. Are they valuable? YES, but only a connection with God can make them meaningful.
4. In fact, meaning is found only in and through a relationship with Jesus.

C. Our value may be attached to our financial assets.

1. Our value is perceived by our employer and what they pay us.
2. Our value to society is positive if we raise
3. We live in a world full of everything except meaning.
4. This is what Solomon discovered: value is everywhere, but meaning isn't.

D. This is what we are all discovering.

1. Our work, our knowledge, our experience, our possessions all have value and utility.
2. But none of them provide meaning.

E. Jesus has the opposite view of life from Solomon.

1. Solomon worried, explored it all, and found it empty.
2. Jesus says don't worry and fret, not because it is empty, but because God holds everything in His hands. God delights to give us the kingdom!

The End

Ecclesiastes 2:24–26 (CSB)

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God's hand, ²⁵ because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? ²⁶ For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner

³ https://medium.com/@matthewbixby_68629/so-life-the-universe-and-everything-59211a39d8df

he gives the task of gathering and accumulating in order to give to the one who is pleasing in God's sight. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

A. When we search for meaning by itself, we find it is like chasing after wind.

1. When we search for God, we don't merely find meaning, but meaning finds us.
2. So many of us are chasing meaning and purpose, but we are doing it apart from Jesus.

B. We end up making the same mistake as the writer of Ecclesiastes.

1. "God is never brought in as a solution to the problems that plague Qohelet."⁴
2. Qohelet, the preacher, pursues wisdom apart from God.
3. Just because we mention God, it doesn't mean we include God.

C. Americans are bad about this.

1. We think that adding God to something makes it Christian.
2. We add Jesus to a song and think it is now Christian.
3. We add Jesus' name to a political party and think it makes them Christian.
4. We add a prayer to a completely secular event, and think God has to bless it.
5. Throughout, we commit the same sin as the writer of Ecclesiastes.
6. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes mentions God but never brings Him in as part of the solution.

[Are we doing the same?](#)

A. Is there an area in your life that you are pushing God out?

1. I know I'm guilty of this.
2. I try to fix the problem without God's wisdom.
3. I say a simple prayer about the situation and then push on ahead like God isn't listening.

⁴ Richard P. Belcher Jr, *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 46, New Studies in Biblical Theology (London; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2018), 142.

B. Does this describe you: You are doing all the right things and finding them to be empty.

1. If you were truly honest with yourself, you would say you are simply going through the motions.
2. Life may not be meaningless to you, but it sure feels disappointing.
3. And you find yourself asking, “So what?”
4. Why am I doing this?

C. I know you know what the answer is: Jesus.

1. We know this, yet it feels impossible to live out.
2. I can’t fix this for you, but I can give you the opportunity to bring it to Jesus.
3. As we pray this morning, whether you have no relationship with Jesus, or everything feels empty and meaningless, or you are wondering “so what?” I have to give us all the opportunity to respond.

D. Here’s how we are going to do this.

1. I am not going to ask you to stand, because once I do, the internal clock starts. You know we are almost over and I can’t keep you standing forever.
2. So I’m going to ask you to stay in your seats.
3. But this morning, if you want to seek the Lord publicly, if you want to be prayed for other believers, if you just want a few minutes to pray along the front, I’m going to give you that opportunity today.