

The World is Not Enough Part III: Let the Good Time Roll – Ecclesiastes 2:1-17

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...(Ecclesiastes 2:1-17, New Living Trans.)

We continue today with the Teacher's examination of life 'under the sun,' i.e., apart from God. Last week he took us on a deep dive into his vain effort to find fulfillment through the acquisition of knowledge. Today, he shares the hard lessons he learned in his effort to find satisfaction through *self-indulgent living*. Walking a variety of avenues, he became what Philip Graham Ryken terms 'an experimental hedonist' who made his personal happiness the chief aim of his life. In this, he proves the words of Victor Frankl, who said, '*when a person can't find a deep sense of meaning, they distract themselves with pleasure.*' Of course, as he tells us up front, each of these avenues were dead ends; not one brought any measure of meaning to his life.

He first tried *laughter*. Now, of course, it's good to laugh and have fun (something the Teacher will make clear in time). But in his little experiment, he tried to make a joke out of everything. That's one way to endure the pain of life; just keep 'em laughing. Problem is, it doesn't work. It's silly, the Teacher says, or more accurately in Hebrew, madness to the point of moral perversion. To live a life in which everything is funny is to live frivolously. Not everything is funny. Life is hard, and you can't always sweep its sorrow under a rug of laughter. Eventually the tough stuff becomes impossible to ignore. Alistair Begg, addressing this point in one of his sermons, tells of a guy who came across a depressed man in a bar. He told the man that he should go see a certain comedian who had come to town, that everyone who had seen him ended up rolling in the aisles. 'That'll cheer you up,' he said. To which the man replied, 'I am that comedian.' When I hear that story I think of Robin Williams, probably the funniest guy who ever lived, who, unbeknownst to many, battled depression all his life. Laughter has its place. But it can't mask life's difficulties forever. Eventually they will rise up and overwhelm you. If that's how you cope with life's trials, you may end up singing with the Bee Gees, 'I started a joke that started the whole world crying/oh if I'd only seen that the joke was on me'

And so, he tried '*wasting away in Margaritaville*.' 'After much thought,' he said, 'I decided to cheer myself with wine.' To be clear, we're not talking about drinking in moderation. He was using alcohol to lift himself from the pit of despair that was his life 'under the sun.' Hiding from the pain in the bottom of a bottle. Do you realize this is why people drink to excess? Why they do drugs? They're searching for something, if not something that will give their lives meaning, at least something that will let them forget about the meaninglessness of their existence for a few hours. But when the morning comes, there it is again: life under the sun. And all the drunkenness in the world won't let you escape the fact that such a life is Hevel. It doesn't help anything. Doesn't answer anything. It only causes more problems.

And so, the Teacher graduated to *the finer things*. He built houses, lands, gardens, parks, and pools (notice the plurals in every case). He built an empire; a massive organization whose sole purpose was to enhance his happiness. He had countless herds and flocks. He purchased slaves to work the fields. He became so rich, and so famous, that, in his own words, 'anything I wanted, I could take.' In all of this we are meant to think of Solomon. This was basically Solomon's life. I can't help but think of the Tech Oligarchs of our time, whose whole existence seems to be one of self-indulgence. The Theorist Douglas Rushkoff, in his book, *Survival of the Richest*, tells of the time he was asked to come to a conference of tech oligarchs to discuss 'the future of technology.' They paid a bundle and flew him to a compound in the middle of nowhere. He soon learned that what the men were concerned about was how to survive 'the event.' They were convinced that civilization would soon suffer a catastrophic collapse, one that they knew own companies were helping to bring about, and they wanted to know how to survive it. They had built compounds for themselves such as the one they were in; bunkers to shield themselves from the problems of the world (seriously, they do that). But they were concerned with the problem of security. What if, when resources became scarce, the security forces they hired to protect them from the masses turned on them? When Rushkoff offered that maybe if they treated them kindly they would be loyal, or better still, if they were concerned about civilization collapsing, they might consider using their

vast wealth to build a better society that wouldn't, or stop doing the things they knew were contributing to the problem, the oligarchs looked at each other as if to say, 'who let this hippy in here?' Can you imagine? These guys couldn't even conceive of doing something that might benefit anyone other than themselves, even when doing so was in their own self-interest. Talk about self-indulgent living. And where did it get them? There they were, hanging out with a futurist worrying about the very future they were creating, unable to change course and realizing that no matter what they did, everything they lived for, everything they built, all their wealth and power, might one day disappear like smoke. And so, while they may not have admitted it that day, they'd come face to face with what the Teacher said so long ago: even if you can take anything you want, you can't hold it forever.

But the Teacher wasn't done. He still had a few other things to try. How about *entertainment*? So he hired wonderful male and female singers to regale him with song. But this too provided only temporary relief from the emptiness of life under the sun. Peggy Lee, in one of the spoken word portions of her classic, *Is That All There is,* says 'when I was 12 years old, my father took me to the circus. There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears, and a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high over our heads. And so, I sat there watching the marvelous spectacle. I had the feeling that something was missing. I didn't know what, but when it was over, I said to myself, 'Is that all there is to a circus?' 'Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing.' That's what so many do. They spend all they have, in money and time at the circus, chasing entertainments, trying to fill the emptiness of life under the sun, trying to hide the pain, pretending all is well when it is not. 'Sing us a song, you're the piano man, sing us a song tonight, 'cause we're all in the mood for a melody, and you got us feelin' alright.' For a moment, that is. But then the moment passes and we ask, 'is that all there is?

But hey, there's always *sex*. That's right folks, we're PG-13 now. In verse 8, the Teacher references having many beautiful concubines. Here, we are most certainly

meant to think of Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Like Father Mulcahy said in MASH, Solomon had a lot to sing about. That was Solomon's life; he went from one partner to the next, night after night after night after night...(although surely he took some nights off). It's not unlike what many people do today. Hook up culture is like this – searching for meaning by falling into one bed after another. But where does it lead? Bob Seeger tells us straight in his song, 'The Fire Inside' using the metaphor of dancing (which I guess is why Southern Baptists are so against that): 'well you've been to the clubs and the discotheques/where they deal one another from the bottom of the deck of promises/where the cautious loners and emotional wrecks/do an acting stretch as a way to hide the obvious/and the lights go down and they 'dance' real close/and for one brief instant they pretend they're safe and warm/then the beat gets louder and the mood is gone/the darkness scatters as the lights flash on/they hold one another just a little too long/and they move apart and then move on/on to the street/on to the next/safe in the knowledge that they tried/faking the smile/hiding the pain/never satisfied.' Yup. That's what hook up culture gets you. And for Solomon, as the Teacher says, even with a 1000 lovers, he never got anything more.

And so finally, as a last resort, the Teacher tried *idiocy*. (v. 12-16). (As if he hasn't proved that already!). What difference does anything make? Whether wise or foolish, it ends the same. Might as well live like an idiot! This, I must say, is quite popular these days. I think of a show that was on MTV years back called Jackass, in which people would basically put themselves into harmful situations and film them. That's whole world now! Go on YouTube, TikTok, or any other number of self-promotional social media sites, and you'll find that millions have discovered that the stupider you behave, the more outrageous your conduct, the more famous you will be! Idiocy will make you a star! Some have used to find success in politics! Oh my, the world is full of idiots isn't it? Some days I read the news and ask the questions from Midnight Oil's song, *The Barka-Darling River*: 'who left the bag of idiots open? Who drank the bottle of bad ideas?' So many drink from it, and the

Teacher did too, figuring if all we have is life under the sun, why not? Both the wise & foolish die, and since you won't be remembered long, may as well go out an idiot.

And so, the Teacher discovered, this is where self-indulgent living leads. Nowhere. Every avenue a dead end street. As the Teacher says, all of it is 'like chasing the wind. There is nothing worthwhile anywhere.' You can try it all, but in the end, well, back to Seeger: 'it comes to you how it all slips away/youth and beauty are gone one day/no matter what you dream or feel or say/it ends in dust and disarray.'

Such is the end of a life built on the fragile ground of self-indulgent living. I suppose the Teacher is telling us exactly what Jesus warned about in his *parable of the Rich Fool*. We read it earlier, so there's no need to belabor its details. But in the end, if all we live for is to 'eat, drink, and be merry,' whether by pushing through life with laughter, seeking solace at the bottom of a bottle, grasping for the finer things, filling our hollow moments with endless entertainments, pursuing sexual conquests, or being what Green Day dubbed 'An American Idiot,' no matter how well we use these distractions to mask our deep dissatisfaction, in the end, we will find that it was all for nothing. Chasing the wind. Hevel. Smoke slipping through our fingers. Frankl was right to note that pleasure is what people seek when they are unable to find meaning elsewhere in the world. But there is another place to look. C.S. Lewis once said, 'if we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.' This is what the teacher discovered, and is trying to share with us. That only a life built upon the solid ground of our being, a life in God, can ever quench the fire inside that burns for what he alone can provide. If you are traveling down any other street, I urge you to turn, and find the only one that isn't a dead end. LUP.