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ECCLESIASTES:
THE QUESTIONS AND THE QUEST

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2:18-26 – THE QUESTION OF WORK

Introduction to the Text

The general concept of work in our culture is that it is bad, or more specifically, it is a necessary evil. We don't like to exert ourselves, but the only way to get the things we need or want is to work. Even though, as Americans living largely free nation, get to choose exactly work we engage in – we still complain about it. Therefore, work falls into the category of life's necessary evils – along with taxes, root canals, and vegetables. This thinking ends up fostering a culture where our lives are then centered around not working – hence, “working for the weekend.” The center of our universe then revolves around the days we are not working, and for many, evolves into trying to find ways to work less, and even avoid working.

Jim Hamilton highlights the essence of this attitude in his book *Work and Our Labor in the Lord*.¹ He points out that soundtrack to the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* includes a song called “Big Rock Candy Mountain.” The song was first recorded in 1928, and it sings about a hobo who invited people to come with him and live in a land where work did not exist. The lyrics of the song describe a land where cigarettes grow on trees, handouts grow on bushes, and streams of lemonade flows down the mountains. You don't even have to cook because the all the hens lay eggs that are soft boiled, and there is a lake of stew that's right next to the river of whiskey that's flowing – right next to the mountain that's made of candy. At the end of the song, the lyrics sing about the desire to “hang the jerk that invented work” in the big rock candy mountain. Hamilton writes, “I wonder if the songwriter realized he would put that noose around God's neck!” The song and its lyrics are typical of Solomon's inquiries that are “under the sun.” In other words, this is how work is understood apart from God – a necessary evil.

¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Work and Our Labor in the Lord*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology Series, ed. Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt (Crossway, 2017), 15.

Review. In the previous pericope (2:12-18), Solomon inquired into the limitation of wisdom, and where the line between wisdom and foolishness was. First, we saw that Solomon saw wisdom as unqualifiedly better than foolishness, however, both the sage and the sucker die. The limitations of what was better – wisdom is better than folly – was made plain in the fact that both the wise and fool still die. Therefore, Solomon found that wisdom failed to give meaning and purpose beyond this life; it was vanity.

Preview. In the previous pericope, death was the line in the sand that made wisdom's limitations plain. So too, in this pericope, death's line in the sand doesn't move. How is our labor, and everything we've gained, going to fare in providing eternal purpose and meaning beyond this life? And what is going to happen to everything that a person has labored for in this life?

Theological focus. In this pericope, the effects of the fall on our work, or toil, is addressed. There are two primary issues that are addressed. The first is all the fruits of our labor is going to be left behind (2:18). Originally, man was created to not die, and thus he, his work, and the results thereof would not have to separate. However, after the fall of man into sin, this separation is now a necessary part of life. The second issue follows closely. Not only must we leave everything behind, but everything that has been labored for is given to someone who has not worked for it, and it could possibly be left to a fool (2:19). Solomon assesses this as "also vanity" (2:19).

Structure. In the current pericope, Ecc 2:18-26, are four divisions, which each section being concluded with "this is also vanity" (2:19), then "this is also vanity" (2:21), and "this is also a vanity and striving after the wind" (2:23). At the end of this pericope, he assesses everything as "also a vanity and a striving after wind" (2:26). In the final section, which is concluded with "vanity and striving after wind" (2:26).

Purpose. Following with the rest of Ecclesiastes, Solomon demonstrates that seeking lasting purpose in our work, labor, and toil is vanity without God.

Exposition of the Text

2:18. In contemporary English, “hate” is a strong word, and there is a potential to attach additional and even unwarranted freight along with it. Essentially, it is important to distinguish between hate, anger, and violence.² Someone may hate vegetables, but it does not necessarily mean they are angry at them or want to do violence against them. It is also important to keep in mind that the conclusion here comes *before* and apart *from* the gift of God, which enables man to enjoy the gifts God has given him (2:24-25).

2:19. This section may not pose much a problem for our culture, because we see it as something good and even helpful to leave behind something for our children. After all, didn’t Solomon himself write that the wise man leaves an inheritance to his grandchildren (Prov 13:22)? But this thinking seems to miss the question that Solomon is asking: what is the eternal benefit of leaving behind a life’s worth of work? Can a life’s work that failed to produce eternal meaning and purpose in one man then produce the same thing in another? No, it fails just the same in all people.

Furthermore, the biblical worldview rejects the idea that the purpose, or even a primary purpose, of parents is to help their children have a better life through wisdom (i.e. education). This was made apparent in the previous pericope, Ecc 2:12-17. The same is true regarding parents’ seeking to better their children’s life through wealth, the current pericope Ecc 2:18-26. In a more general sense, this means that a man’s purpose is not “to make the world a better place” through benevolence, philanthropy, or altruism.³ Efforts to do so are not only largely inept in producing its goal in within a family context, but it is also inept in larger scales with governments and nations.⁴

² Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 161.

³ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:295.

⁴ Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus, *The Only Solution to World Poverty*, January 30, 2015, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-only-solution-to-world-poverty/>.

Here is a great irony: the very man who wonders if the one who inherits all his work and wealth is a fool – he himself has *played the fool*. When David was about to die, he exhorted his son to:

“... keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, that the LORD may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying, ‘If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.’

Solomon was given an inheritance from his father, which included wealth and power. Yet, because of Solomon’s folly, the kingdom was split in two (1 Ki 11:9-40), civil war ensued (1 Ki 16:1-28), and the eventual downfall of both the northern kingdom (2 Ki 17:5-6; 1 Chron 5:26) and southern kingdom (2 Ki 24:11-14) came to pass. Maybe Solomon himself is looking at his son, Rehoboam, and is realizing that the apple is not going to fall far from the royal tree (1 Ki 12:1-15).

2:20. What, exactly, is Solomon despairing of? On first glance, the reading seems to communicate that Solomon is *himself* despairing. However, it could also mean that Solomon was “disillusioning himself” from pursuing toil, work, and labor as providing lasting and eternal meaning as a validation for one’s life.⁵ In other words, Solomon “despaired” of the pursuit of lasting meaning through work. Again, it seems helpful to distinguish meaning between despair and depression. Despair can be marked as a parallel loss of hope and interest.⁶ It is by giving up pursuit in labor as the purpose of life, not being depressed, that he then calls his audience to “find enjoyment” in the work of his hands (2:24). In other words, Solomon concludes to enjoy one’s life’s work, but that work is not life.

⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:295.

⁶ Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 164.

2:21. The reason for his despair is made plain, because all the work in which a man may labor is given to someone that did not work for it. Here is an explicit affirmation of what Solomon, wrote in the Proverbs, “wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whomever gathers little by little will increase it” (Prov 13:11). When large sums of money come without the accompanying wisdom and labor, that person doesn’t know the value of what they have. It is no surprise that as soon as it comes; it goes.

There are many people who populate the pews of churches today that subject themselves to a false hope in (statistically impossible) lottery odds. Alternatively, a person may seek to find provision through changing jobs often, frustrated as their pay and lack of gain and eschewing working steadily, faithfully, and diligently for a long amount of time while exercising thrift, patience, and trust in the provision of God. In other words, the biblical principle is that God does not provide by “windfalls,” but by “handfuls.”⁷

2:22. Again, Solomon returns to the question of “gain,” or “profit.” He phrases this by asking what a person possesses from all his “toil” and “striving of heart” that happens “beneath the sun.” It is a rhetorical question, and the rhetorical answer is: *nothing*. Again, it is important to remind ourselves that this profit comes from an “under the sun” perspective – one without God.

2:23. The perspective of finding work “under the sun” as providing the meaning and purpose of life apart from God then leaves a person’s days “full of sorrow,” and his work a “vexation.” It echoes Jacob’s assessment of his life:

And Pharaoh said to Jacob, “How many are the days of the years of your life?” And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning” (Gen 47:8-9).

⁷ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Crossway, 2012), 176.

Even sleep evades such a person, because “even in the night his heart does not rest.” The question here is what provides peace of mind in a world that is unstable, inconstant flux, and impossible to predict? Consider Solomon says in the Psalms:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep (Ps 127:1-2).

Solomon writes here about the vanity of eating the “bread of anxious toil.” Here, Solomon is not talking about literal bread, but what laboring in vain brings – anxiety and sleepless nights. Solomon writes that those who labor for money do not know when to stop, and by the time they are forced to stop their money “sprouts wings” and flies away (Prov 23:4-5). Those who attain peace of mind and an ability to sleep well do so because they trust that the Lord has blessed their toil, because it is the Lord himself who builds the house.

2:24-25. Nothing should not be taken as an absolute statement – as if literally nothing is better than him being able to “eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil.” Rather, this is better understood as the *clear conclusion* of his inquiry into labor: labor is not the meaning of life, but the fruits of it are to be enjoyed in this life. Furthermore, Solomon says that ability to do so is a gift itself from God. In other words, believers “should above all other [capacities] have a capacity to enjoy life.”⁸ This is accomplished by trusting in God and enjoying what he has provided in life.

In the New Testament, the desires of men’s hearts lead them to covet, fight, and even murder. The motive of seeking things “under the sun” is that they may “spend it on [their] passions” (Jas 4:1-7). This kind of activity is demonic and satanic (Jas 4:7). It should not be supervising that men cannot seem to enjoy what they have in this life

⁸ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:296.

apart from a heart that has been made new by the power of Christ.

Practically speaking, this can manifest in certain ways. Each person must look introspectively as assess their own heart. However, there are some observable and external manifestations of the inability to simply enjoy things in this life. When God blesses his people with something from our labors, whether it be a house, a car, furniture, or any material blessing – we tend to become possessed by our possessions. In other words, rather than utilizing the things God has blessed us with to enjoy him, we exhibit an ungodly desire to keep the possessions in pristine condition. A scratch on the car, a tear in the furniture can bring out ungodly attitudes – which reveal out desires: the blessings serve our own passions rather than allowing us to enjoy God.

2:26. Here is an important aspect of the message of Ecclesiastes. Apart from God, enjoyment of your life's work is momentary and fleeting. Lasting enjoyment is only achievable by knowing God. Ultimately, the efforts and toil of the wicked – they are end up helping you to enjoy life.

A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous (Prov 13:22).

"This is the portion of a wicked man with God, and the heritage that oppressors receive from the Almighty: If his children are multiplied, it is for the sword, and his descendants have not enough bread. Those who survive him; the pestilence buries, and his widows do not weep. Though he heap up silver like dust, and pile up clothing like clay, he may pile it up, but the righteous will wear it, and the innocent will divide the silver (Job 27:13-17).

You don't have to go play the lottery – all the riches in this world are designed, in God's sovereignty and providence, to benefit you. This is how the Bible informs Christians when we see the wealth of the world, the wealth of those who deny God and yet are called "blessed" because they have millions. As believers in God and the Bible, whatever benefit you think you'd get from winning the lottery or becoming wealthy, God clearly teaches that all the wealth of the unrighteous benefit the righteous, because it is us whom he gives the ability to enjoy it as a gift that comes from

the very hand of God himself, plus believers have all the riches in Christ they will ever need (Phil 4:19). What more benefit could a believer possibly want?

You get to enjoy the smooth asphalt roads.⁹ You get to enjoy the finest South American coffee beans. You get to enjoy a garden that grows well because of advances in methods and fertilizers. You get to get to enjoy the bike with a smoother ride because of the shock absorbers that are built into it. You enjoy a climate-controlled environment no matter where you go – home, work, or car. You get to enjoy that nice computer, or phone that you have as a gift from God – all because God has given you the ability (i.e., gift) to do so.

Finally, Solomon concludes with “this also is vanity and a striving after the wind.” An important grammatical note is determining the antecedent of the word “this” in 2:26. Is “this” referring to eating, drinking, and finding enjoyment in a person’s toil? Is it referring to Solomon’s inquiry in 2:18-23? Is “this also vanity and a striving after wind” referring to the sinner’s gathering and collecting that is going to be given to the one who pleases God? While the language does not specifically and grammatically identify the antecedent, it seems most likely that it is specifically referring to the sinner attempt to pursue lasting meaning through his work, only to have it benefit those who please God.¹⁰

The bumper sticker that reads “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Well, the next question is, “wins what?” Solomon tells us that the one who dies with the most toys wins at giving their toys, and their enjoyment, over to those who please God. It is not difficult to see why “this” is vanity and a chasing after the wind.¹¹

⁹ If the reaction in your mind is to object that the roads in your city or town are riddled with potholes, I would simply ask how the roads in India, Afghanistan, most South American countries, eastern China, or many other countries. We tend to sinfully complain when things are not near perfect.

¹⁰ Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

¹¹ Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 46–47.

Redemptive Focus

The redemptive focus of this text centers on our concept of work. What is the purpose of our work? Why do we work? What are the reasons we choose a particular profession? The man who does not labor for God, for Christ, for things of eternity works in vain. All his work will ultimately come to nothing (Ecc 2:26).

However, for the Christian, work will have eternal significance, will have eternal rewards, and will have eternal commendation. Foremost, the primary purpose of any Christian's work is to bring the most glory to God (1 Cor 10:31). When a Christian seek a vocational calling, the primary consideration is how to bring glory to God through that vocation. Second, a Christian must know that he works with Jesus as his boss, commander, or master (Col 3:23-24). That means a Christian know each working hour is to be worked to maximum effort, not just when the boss is watching (Eph 6:6). The faithful Christian can labor knowing that not only is his labor not in vain (1 Cor 15:58), but he will hear the affirming words of Christ himself, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:23).

Conclusion and Summary

In Luke 12:19-21, Jesus tells the story of a man who sought to accumulate wealth for himself, apparently not considering that he could die, and all his possessions are not going to be his anymore.

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

This parable parallels well story told by Lisa Rogak, and she is the author of a book called *Death Warmed Over*.¹² It is a combination of cookbook and sociological study of funeral meals and rituals. She starts it with the story of a man dying at home in bed. He could smell the aroma of chocolate chip cookies—his favorite—baking downstairs. He wanted one more cookie before he died. He dragged his body out of bed, rolled down the stairs, crawled into the kitchen, and reached out a trembling arm to grasp one final cookie, when he felt the sting of a spatula smack his hand. “Put that back,” his wife said. “They’re for the funeral.”

The rich fool had many cookies, and he thought they were all for him. One more barn. One more crop. One more cookie. Then one night out comes the spatula. Whack. “They don’t belong to you. They’re for the funeral.” The lives of God’s children are to be ordered around him, not the results of our labor. Only then will God’s children find rest, only then will he give his beloved sleep.

¹² Lisa Rogak, *Death Warmed Over: Funeral Food, Rituals, and Customs from Around the World* (Ten Speed Press, 2004).

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