The Problem of Death and the Answer of Grace
Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

When we wanted to replace our old van, a friend suggested I check out the Skoda Kodiaq, so I looked at their online brochure. Now, they're not just selling a car, are they? They're selling a dream, a promise of happiness, of life put right.

Well, we're looking at Ecclesiastes. It's an investigation of the *hebel* of life. That Hebrew word for mist, vapour, breath. That in what the writer repeatedly calls an 'under-the-sun' world, where this life, and secular, scientific materialism is all there is, life is fleeting, and it doesn't work the way it should, and, ultimately, it's empty of meaning.

But in today's passage, the writer takes us down all the roads that promise you a way out; all the paths that promise you happiness in an 'under-the-sun', this-life-is-all-there-is world. Because it's not just car adverts.

And who better to take us on that ride than Solomon, the man who was wise and wealthy and with-it. Because if, like him, you had unimaginable wealth, and the time and intellectual capacity to investigate life, surely you'd find meaning in life, wouldn't you?

The Promise of Help
Blaise Pascal famously said, 'All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use.' But what are those means? In a world where this life is all there is, where can you find happiness?

Stop number 1, the University Library. Verse 13, 'I applied my heart to seek and to search out *by wisdom* all that is done under heaven.' As a student, my physiology tutor was Dr Hillier. And Dr Hillier would repeatedly refer to Mother Nature. And one supervision it got too much, so I said, 'er, Dr Hillier, I think you meant to say, Father God.' And he looked at me and said, 'Mr Slack, you have a very cavalier attitude to your studies.'

No one could accuse Solomon of that, could they? Because he applied himself to this search for meaning through the life of the mind. But why take that approach first? It's obvious, isn't it? In a naturalistic, materialistic world, our greatest enemy is ignorance. And so the answer is: knowledge. If we can just understand the world in which we live, and fill in the holes of our knowledge, then we'll have the answers to humanity's problems. Apply yourself to the scientific effort, or philosophical pursuit. Read the great authors, or if that's too daunting, pick up a book from the self-help section of the book shop, and you'll begin to find the answers to life.

And the Preacher says, v14, 'I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind.'

Have you ever watched children running around in the wind trying to catch it? It's a fun game when you're seven. But what if that's life? What if all our attempts to find meaning through knowledge are as hopeless as that?

Leonard Woolf, the British intellectual and political theorist, said of all his writing: 'I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill…

would be exactly the same as it is if I had played ping-pong instead of writing books. I have therefore to make a rather ignominious confession that I must have, in a long life, ground through 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work.'

Maybe he was just depressed. Well, listen to Richard Dawkins, evangelist for an under-the-sun, knowledge-and-science-are-the-answer-to-life approach to life: Human existence, he says, is 'neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, *but simply callous:* indifferent to all suffering, *lacking all purpose*.' So when asked to provide a reason for your existence, the approach to life he wants you to adopt answers, there is no reason. Your existence is utterly without purpose.

At least he's honest! But the Preacher goes further. He explains *why* the philosophical or scientific approach can never satisfy your search for meaning. Verse 15, 'What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.' In other words, no matter how much you think, you can't straighten life out. There's a bent-ness, a warped-ness to life that knowledge alone can never sort. There are dreams you can't fulfil, desires you can't satisfy.

Because, in an under-the-sun world, in which God and the supernatural have been erased, all problems are *natural* and all must have a natural solution. And the Preacher is saying, yes, but that's a false premise, and it leaves you unable to straighten out what's wrong. Because neither science or philosophy can ever tell you *why* you matter in a world where nothing matters. They can never tell you why you have desires this world can't satisfy. Sure, you may end up with a razor sharp mind, but your heart will still be empty.

And the result is… you end up more depressed than ever. Verse 18: 'For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.' You see, when you begin to face the facts of an under-the-sun world view, where your life is devoid of purpose and human existence is callous, it leads to existential despair. All you've done is increase the problem.

There's a story of some parents getting their son's end of year school report, in which the teacher wrote, 'If ignorance is bliss, your son is going to be the happiest person on earth.' And the Preacher smiles and goes 'yup, in a world where God has been removed, you're better off not thinking too deeply about it. But what kind of a world view is that?'

You see, the existential unhappiness that comes with such a view of life should make you question such a view of life, shouldn't it? Verse 13, 'It is an unhappy business *that God has given* to the children of man to be busy with.' The Preacher observes this search for meaning, this restlessness of our hearts, and sees it as a restlessness given by God. As CS Lewis said, "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." And the Preacher's saying, your restlessness is telling you, you've been made to rest. Your search for meaning and purpose tells you, there is meaning and purpose.

But if science and philosophy can't give you that rest, where else can you turn? To pleasure, the Preacher says. Stop number 2: the bars and concert halls.

Chapter 2:1: 'I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself."' Ask yourself: if you could have all your desires for enjoyment and pleasure satisfied, would you be satisfied? Who are you kidding? says the Preacher: v1, 'Behold, this also was vanity.'

And Solomon should know. Verse 2, ‘I said of laughter, “it is mad,” and of pleasure, “what use is it?”’ And *laughter* and *pleasure* represent two different forms of pleasure, what we might call low and high-brow culture. There’s *laughter* - go out on a Saturday night, have some beers and watch the latest comedian. Or there’s *pleasure*, ‘shall we go to the gallery followed by the classical concert, tonight?’

But high or low, they both fail to answer life’s emptiness, don’t they? Now, sure, a good ski fail video can help you forget your problems. But it’s a gallows humour. It lifts the weight for a moment, but only by diverting your attention, never by solving the problem. As Robin Williams said, "I think the saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy. Because they know what it’s like to feel absolutely worthless and they don’t want anybody else to feel like that.” In other words, when you see the worthlessness of life in an under-the-sun world, what is there to do but drown the facts in laughter? Sure, says the Preacher, but that still doesn’t change the facts. It still can’t tell you you matter. It just numbs the pain. In fact, he says, it’s madness. Not mental madness, but moral madness. A failure-to-face-the-facts-and-read-the-world-right madness.

Ok, but what about higher culture? Because music, and art, even fine dining, they can offer you moments of transcendence, can’t they? Sure! Those moments when, just for a moment, a window opens into a world above the sun, and you know, there *is* more to life than this.

I listen to the radio station Swiss Classics in the car, much to the girls disgust, and they recently played an excerpt from Beethoven’s 5th symphony, and even the girls fell silent in the back. Because how could you not? In his book, *The Joy of Music*, Leonard Bernstein, the composer, wrote about a conversation he had with a friend on a road trip, and how every great composer seeks a magic ingredient, ‘the inexplicable ability to know what the next note has to be.’ And then he said, ‘Beethoven had this gift in a degree that leaves them all panting in the rear… Our boy [Beethoven] has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world… something we can trust, that will never let us down.’ To which his friend replied, ‘But that is almost a definition of God.’ To which Bernstein said, ‘I meant it to be.’

But scientific materialism says, ‘nope, it’s just a chemical reaction in your brain. There is no ‘stuff from heaven’ there is no ‘right in the world.’’ Because, what Bernstein says, and what you know from experience to be true, only works if there is a God, if there is a way for the world to be right, if there is a note that *should* come next. if there is purpose and meaning. But if there isn’t, then music and art are no different from laughing at a stand-up comic: temporary distractions from hopelessness.

Well then, says the Preacher, stop number 3, Hornbach. Fill your time with projects, v4-5: ‘I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.’ What’s he doing? It’s as if he’s trying to recreate Eden. A world of beauty in a world of *hebel*. He’s trying to get back to a world that’s right, in which he has a place. But it’s a secular Eden.

And he fills this Eden with all the trappings of power and wealth, v7-8: ‘I bought male and female slaves… I had also great possessions of herds and flocks… I also gathered for myself silver and gold… I got singers… and many concubines.’ Pleasure, projects, power, possessions… and plenty of sex.

And his verdict? Verse 11, ‘all was vanity and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.’ Hedonism, he says, is like those kids chasing the wind. It’s hopeless. Because the more you try squeeze things for pleasure, the less they satisfy. And like an addict, you need the next thing to give you the rush you seek.

They promise so much but they fail to deliver on the critical issue of life - which is its end.

The Problem of Death

One of the problems doctors face is explaining risk. Let’s say a disease carries a risk of dying of 20%. Great, you might think, I have an 80% chance of survival! But not if you’re in the 20%! And the Preacher says, we’re all in the 20%. Verse 14, ‘The same event happens to all.’ It doesn’t matter whether you’ve lived a wise or foolish life. It doesn’t matter if you’ve enjoyed Oprah or Opera, you’re going to die. To quote Robin Williams again, ‘Believe it or not, each and everyone of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die.’ As one commentator puts it, ‘death is the ultimate auditors report.’

And if philosophy and pleasure are like bubbles twinkling in the sun of an under-the-sun world, death is the needle that bursts them. And what does that do for all our accomplishments? Verse 15-17, ‘I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten… So I hated life.’

You see, it’s not just that we die. It’s that everyone who knows us will die. Death, the great leveller will do its work, and everyone will be levelled. And, eventually, the world itself will be levelled. And your desire to live on through your reputation will be gone. Which makes every project pointless. No wonder he says, I hated life!

Now, when a parent plays a game with their child, they’ve got a decision to make, haven't they. Do they let them win, or not? Let them win, and they get a false sense of how good they are. But always beat them and they’ll never want to play, they’ll give up, because what’s the point? Exactly, says the Preacher. And death will always beat you. Every grave stone tells you, you can never win at life, so what’s the point? And in v18-23 he describes what every politician and every academic knows: spend your life building something up, and the next guy comes along and knocks it all down.

And yet, it’s not just death that makes you question the value of your work. Think about stress: verses 22-23: ‘What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.’ Think of the sleepless nights your work brings. For what? For something that is going to be entirely forgotten, if this life is all there is. What is that? *Hebel*, the Preacher says.

Now, as the father of four daughters I have witnessed one or two emotional moments. Because there are times when the pointlessness of work and studies and life just gets to you. And when those moments come, in our family we call it, ‘throwing yourself in the pit.’ Well, the Preacher knows what that pit looks like: v20, ‘So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair’. He threw himself

in the pit. Because when you see life and work and knowledge and pleasure for what they really are in a world where nothing matters, what is there to do but despair?

The Answer of Grace

Because down in that pit, a shaft of light shines, v24: 'There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. *This also, I saw, is from the hand of God*.' Listen, the Preacher's saying, if you think pleasure or work is what life is ultimately about, you're never going to find satisfaction.

But… what if there's another way of seeing life? What if you allow God to enter your closed world? What if you begin to see food and drink and work and pleasure as his gifts to you, as evidence of his grace to you? What if life were about enjoying what God gives you, rather than you trying to squeeze out of stuff what it was never meant to give you? As one commentator says, What if life is gift not gain? Verse 25, '*For apart from him*, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?'

The nihilist says, eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. The hedonist says, eat, drink and be merry and don't think about dying. But the Preacher says, Nah! Eat, drink and be merry, because although tomorrow we die, these are God's good gifts to you, and you're safe in his hands, and when you first have him, then you can begin to find joy in the face of *hebel*.

You see, you can search for meaning in an under-the-sun world and you'll fail. But what if all along, God has been searching for you? Like he came to Adam and Eve in the garden, asking, where are you?

John's gospel tells us that Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding feast, where he turned six enormous jars of water into wine. Why make that your first miracle? Because he's saying, 'I'm the Lord of the feast, I'm the host of the greatest party of all. You look for joy and ultimate fulfilment in food and drink and sport and sex, but it's only in me that you'll find the joy that never ends; the joy that doesn't leave you with a hangover or a heart full of regrets.

A woman once met Jesus at a well. And she had gone through a long list of sexual relationships. And Jesus says to her, 'whoever drinks the water I give will never be thirsty again.' (John 4:14). In other words, 'you go from one man's bed to another thinking, this one will love me, this one will tell me I matter, but it's in me that you'll find something far more satisfying than all the bedrooms in the world can give you. It's in me you'll find the One who tells you, you are loved.'

Solomon tried to find a point to life through wisdom and knowledge, and Jesus came and said, 'Someone greater than Solomon is here.' (Matt 12:42). It's in me you'll find the meaning you're searching for.

The Preacher says that in an under-the-sun world our work is futile. But Jesus came as a carpenter, a manual labourer. But his ultimate work was at the cross. And Isaiah says of that work, 'Out of the anguish [the toil] of his soul he shall see and be satisfied' (Is 53:11). Because it's at the cross that he begins to unravel the *hebel* of life.

You see, if death is the needle that pricks the bubbles of philosophy and pleasure and power and possessions, who will prick death's bubble? Jesus does. Fine art and music offer you moments when you know there's a world above the sun. But through his resurrection, Jesus punches a hole through

to that world, and you begin to see that your life does matter. It matters so much Christ died to save it.

You see, when you live life as gift, not gain, when you see your relationships, your work, your possessions, not as things to be squeezed, but as gifts of his grace, then you'll see yourself as a caretaker of blessing to serve others with along the way. And, in the process, you'll find contentment. And as Paul says, 'Godliness with contentment *is great gain*.' (1 Tim 6:6).

Verse 26, 'For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting.'

That word *sinner* means 'one who misses the mark'; who misses the point of life. Who thinks life is about getting; about acquiring ever more knowledge, experiencing ever more highs, achieving ever more goals, or going through ever more relationships. But in the end, that's all he gets, the Preacher says.

But see all of life as God's gift to you and that grace will change you: from an attitude of needing the next thing to satisfy you, to one of gratitude. And a life of gratitude is always going to be more joyful than a life of getting.

In Psalm 16, David says, 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' (16:11) And Christ is at God's right hand. So see in him the greatest gift of all and you'll rightly handle philosophy and pleasure and projects and power and possessions. And you'll enjoy the ride as you do.