

ECCLESIASTES: THE MID-LIFE CRISIS  
 “The Success Syndrome: Work – Wine – Women” 2:1-26

TEXT: 2:1-26

v. 1 I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless.

v. 2 “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?”

v. 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

v. 4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

v. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

v. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

v. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

v. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man.

v. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

v. 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desire; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.

v. 11 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.

v. 12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king’s successor do than what has already been done?

v. 13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

v. 14 The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

v. 15 Then I thought in my heart, “The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?” I said in my heart, “This too is meaningless.”

v. 16 For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool the wise man too must die!

v. 17 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.

v. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

v. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

v. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.

v. 21 For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

v. 22 What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?

v. 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

v. 24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God,

v. 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

v. 26 To the man 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.

### INTRODUCTION:

In our first study together we asked the question, “Is that all there is?” or the foundation for the mid-life. We learned that life is one gigantic frustration filled with futility without a relationship to Jesus Christ and that a man receives no gain for his labor when it is for selfish ends. Everything is meaningless without Him. We also learned that though man does not remember us, God never forgets. We come now to the next study and we find the success syndrome, which involves the three W’s:

1. work
2. wine
3. women

Swindoll in his book Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back points out, “Competition requires high-level performance. People demands add to the pressure, temper flare, stomachs turn, ulcers bleed, hearts break, nerves unravel, minds blow, some drop out, most tighten their grip and try to cope. Add financial strain, inflation, traffic jams, unemployment, unplanned pregnancies, failure at school, obesity, smog, surgery, loneliness, alcoholism, drugs and death; subtract the support of the family unit, divide by dozens of different opinions, and you come up with a formula that has the makings of madness. Block all avenues of escape and you have an enormous powder keg with a terribly short fuse. Even if you are a Christian and love God intensely and believe the Bible and genuinely want to walk in obedience.” When the formation for the mid-life crisis has been laid and there is meaninglessness to all of one’s activities, there are a number of directions that you can go. One is to follow the success syndrome. This is trying to achieve great wealth by becoming a work – a holic. It is the desire to be a millionaire at 35. How different the story would be if one could write Psalm 16:11 over this particular chapter:

“Thou wilt make know to me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; in thy right hand there are pleasures forever.”

In the Christian Medical Society Journal in an article called “The Mid-Life: A Darkwood” we read the following: “Goals at mid-life will usually be more personal than professional. Dr. Meyer Friedman’s research has led him to conclude that, ‘How an American male lives ranks far above what he eats in determining the probability of a heart attack in his middle years.’ He makes three suggestions worth pondering:

1. Things worth being are better than things worth having.
2. Live by the calendar rather than the stopwatch.
3. Consider each day that does not contain something of memory value, something related to beauty, love, growth, or novelty a lost day.”

Veldey points out that “grief often causes a man to plunge into pleasure. Today in the midst of perplexities and disillusionments people are madly seeking pleasure to relieve the monotony of life. Solomon has tried wine, women and song but has all turned to ashes in his hands.”

v. 1 I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless.

Since everything is meaningless activity to Solomon and he is not finding the fulfillment in life that he desires, he is now launched in a search for the answer to this dilemma. In study #1 we noted together that he tried wisdom and found that with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. And now he is going to test pleasure. And he tells us the result, that that too is meaningless.

Jim Conway in his work Men in Mid-Life Crisis says, “This new god is called indulgence. It is the god of pleasure, luxury, gusto, comfort, ease, sensuality, the god of hedonism. The reasoning goes something like this: I’ve worked hard all of my life. I obeyed my parents when I was a little kid. Did what I was supposed to do in school. Went to church like a good little boy. Went to college, got a good job, got married and settled down as society expected. Started a family, bought a house in the suburbs, even managed to get a second car. I took out life insurance and started retirement funds. I became respectable in the community, was a member of PTA, the Jaycee’s and the local church board. I worked hard at my job. I’m now vice-president in charge of sales in a four state area. I’ve paid for braces, piano lessons, four different stages of bicycles and memberships at the Y. I’ve footed the bills for all kinds of trips and vacations and I’m carrying a big load to make sure that my kids get a good college education. I’m tired of doing all this. It’s time that I get some pleasure out of life. It’s time for me to indulge myself. I’m going to follow a new lifestyle that does not include God and sacrifice. I am going to start using money for my own pleasure, my own leisure, to get me the kind of freedom that I want. I am going to use my life and time and money and energy to get me the kind of intimacy and sex and pleasure that I want. God has talked to me all my life about serving other people, giving to other people, supporting other people. Now it is time I get some of that. We have a little joke in our family, when a person who feels over-worked and full of self-pity,

says, I have worked my fingers to the bone and what do I get for it? The rest of the family joins in and cheerfully yells, Bony fingers! Some men see a direct conflict between a god of self-sacrifice and service and their own personal needs because they know no other way to define a relationship with God. They conclude that they need a new God and set out to follow this new god of indulgence and pleasure.”

Dennison in his book Shock It to Me, Doctor says, “The unfulfilled longing of the Pleasure-seeker is expressed tellingly in a song made famous by Barbara Streisand:

The merry-go-round is beginning to taunt me  
Have I stayed too long at the fair?  
There’s nothing to win and no one to want me  
Have I stayed too long at the fair?

Such a longing isn’t surprising in view of Solomon’s confession. Fortunate is the person who discovers that he is more than an animal to be ruled by passion, who can fill his emptiness with the spirit of God, who realized that Paschal was right in saying, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only God can fill through His Son Jesus Christ.”

Proverbs 14:13 “Even in laughter, the heart may be in pain and the end of joy may be grief.”

v. 2 “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?”

Here he makes his statement about laughter being foolish and then raises the question, What does pleasure accomplish?

David Hubbard in his book Beyond Futility says, “The wise professor who shared his experiences and his viewpoints in the book of Ecclesiastes would have enjoyed the county fair. He would have understood the intrigue with which a fair can put its noose around our hearts and bind us to its attractions. Pleasure was part of the agenda he set for himself. It was a key course in his curriculum to understand life. After he tested wisdom and found out that its contribution was limited because it had the power to increase human suffering but not the power to change reality. He turned next to pleasure to see what depths of meaning he could find in it. We must not let the bluntness of his conclusion, Pleasure is empty, blind us to the lure of pleasure. You can be sure that the wise man enjoyed himself a good bit while working toward his negative conclusion. After all, part of pleasure’s lure is that it offers to heighten our senses. We are made to enjoy a tender touch, a tasty morsel, a tangy beverage, a graceful figure, a delicate perfume. From the standpoint of our senses, we might conclude that pleasure is what we are made for. The Preacher sought to test that view of life by abandoning himself to pleasure. He gave his senses every chance to thrill and tingle, to stir and soothe. Would he uncover life’s full purpose by arousing his sensitivities.”

It has another snare. Pleasure satisfies only during the act. Repetition is the key to pleasure. One drink, one sexual fling, one contest won, one project accomplished, one wild party—none of these, nor all of them put together can be enough to bring satisfaction. The quest for pleasure is like eating salted peanuts. It is impossible to stop after the first bite. One bite leads to another because the first leaves no lasting impact. To reflect on the delights of the first peanut is far less gratifying than to

reach for the second, and on it goes. Far from comforting us, each act of pleasure leaves us thirsty for the next.

Only when we can give the right answer to this question that Jesus posed to Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” To give the wrong answer is to be as foolish as a grown man who lingers over cotton candy at the county fair when the reality is found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jennings points out, “What then is the necessary logical deduction from two such pictures but this: The Lord Jesus infinitely surpasses all the world in filling the hungry heart of man.”

William MacDonald points out, “Having failed to find fulfilment in intellectual pursuits, Solomon turns in chapter 2 to the pursuit of pleasure. It seems reasonable that one would be happy if one could just enjoy enough pleasure. He thought pleasure by definition means the enjoyable sensations that come from the gratification of personal desires. So he decided that he would live it up, that he would try to experience every stimulation of the senses known to man. He would drink the cup of fun to the full and then at least his heart would ask no more. The search ended in failure. He concludes, The pleasures under the sun are empty. This disappointment is echoed in the verse, ‘I tried the broken cisterns of pleasure but all the waters failed. E’en as I stooped to drink, they fled and mocked me as I wailed.’”

v. 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

In essence Solomon, in his testing of pleasure, pursued laughter, wine, and then we are going to notice in our next verse that he begins to undertake great projects. He tells us here in this particular verse what he was trying to do. He wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. James 4:14 “Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

Bridges points out, “These pleasures must surely have taken away the wise man’s heart when he attempted to link them with holy communion with his God. The purity of a godly taste can only be maintained in a close and heavenly walk. When the heart is right, this will be the life which our soul loves and in which alone we shall desire to live. To read, to think, to love, to hope, to pray – these are the things that make man happy.”

Swindoll in his book Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back says, “In our members there is a slumbering inclination toward desire, which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once, a secret smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire or ambition or vanity or desire for revenge or love of fame and power or greed from money or, finally, that strange desire for the beauty of the world, of nature. Joy in God is extinguished in us and we seek all of our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us. He loses all reality and only desire for the creature is real. The only reality is the devil. Satan does not

here fill us with hatred of God but with forgetfulness of God. And now his falsehood is added to this proof of strength. The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of the man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us. The questions present themselves: Is what the flesh desires really sin in this case? Is it really not permitted to me? Yes, expected of me, now, here, in my particular situation to appease desire? The tempter puts me in a privileged position as he tried to put the hungry Son of God in a privileged position. I boast of my privilege against God. It is here that everything within me rises up against the word of God.”

v. 4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

v. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

v. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

v. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.

I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

v. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.

I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well – the delights of the heart of man.

v. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

Here Solomon outlines eight projects that he undertook in seeking to find meaning in life. First, he got involved in building a house. He drew up the plans and it must have been magnificent. Once the plans were settled upon, he began the building of his dream home.

Secondly, he planted vineyards.

Third, he made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

Fourth, he made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

Fifth, he bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in his house.

Sixth, he also got involved in the cattle and sheep business. He had more flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before him.

Seventh, he got involved in the silver and gold markets.

Eighth, he got himself some musicians and formed a harem, who served to delight the heart of Solomon.

v. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

In essence, Solomon is telling us that he reached the pinnacle of success. He struggled up the corporate ladder and was greater by far than anybody else in Jerusalem. And in all of it his wisdom stayed with him.

v. 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor.

Solomon speaks of two members of the body: (1) “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; and (2) I refused my heart no pleasure.”

He sums it up by saying, “My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all of my labor.” There was certainly personal satisfaction in what Solomon was able to accomplish. The reward for all of his labor was that his heart took delight in it.

1 John 2:15,16 “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the boastful pride of life is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away and also its desires, but the one who does the will of God abides forever.”

v. 11 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.

After Solomon got through with all of these great projects and undertakings and he had denied his eyes nothing or his heart any pleasure and he did receive a reward, strictly a fleeting one, from all of his labor; yet when he surveyed all that his hands had done and he had toiled to achieve, he uses three of the key phrases that occur in the book:

1. It was meaningless
2. It was a chasing after the wind.
3. Nothing was gained under the sun.

There is really no meaning or purpose in possessions and pleasures. It just leaves you thirsty for more.

Bridges points out, “Mistake not then the glare of this world’s glory for solid happiness. God would have us rejoice in our labor, enjoy our earthly blessings, but not rest in them. Rejoice as though we rejoice not. A momentary pleasure is all that can be looked for. Let earth be the cistern only, not the fountain. Let its best blessings be loved after Him, for Him as the sunbeam of His love. Let nothing of earth be our rest. God never intended so poor a portion for His redeemed ones. What were the pleasures of Solomon’s earthly paradise compared with the unspeakable delight of eating of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

Derek Kidner says, “Even the best of these pursuits, though, will satisfy us only in passing. There comes the reckoning, “Then I considered all that my hands had done and because of death the final count comes out at nothing. What makes it still more painful is to realize that his zero result is an obliteration, an undoing. There are values. Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. But there are none that endure when we are no longer there, nor anyone else to value them.”

Leupold says, “So this verse is still in the nature of a summary. It says, in effect, whatever occurred to me as possibly entering into the experiment I undertook and while the various projects were being put to the test one by one, there was at least some pleasure the doing of them. And that was, in fact, what led the author to move from one experiment to the other as he says, ‘For my mind found joy because of all my labor and this was my portion from all my toil.’ The projecting of the plans was a pleasure. The plans were so interesting that the interest they created was

his reward. At least this much must be affirmed. If even the excitement of the novelty of the experiments had held no interest for their author, he would have been a very blasé personality. But this pleasure lasted only as long as the project was being taken in hand. And the novelty of it had not yet worn off. But the backward look on all that was undertaken was extremely disappointing. Here it is, but when I looked all was vanity and striving for wind.”

MacDonald points out, “A victim of today’s sex obsession felt afterward that she had been cheated. She wrote, ‘I guess I wanted sex to be some psychedelic jackpot that made the whole world light up like a pinball machine, but when it was all over I felt I had been shortchanged. I remember thinking, Is that all there is? Is that all there really is?’ Ralph Barton, a top cartoonist was bored too. He wrote, ‘I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes. I have gone from wife to wife, from house to house, and have visited great countries of the world. But I am fed up with devise to fill up 24 hours of the day.’ The failure of pleasure and possessions to fill the heart of man was further illustrated by a fictional character who only had to wish for something and he got it instantly. He wanted a house and there it was with servants at the door. He wanted a Cadillac and there it was with a chauffeur. He was elated at the beginning but it soon begin to pall on him. He said to an attendant, ‘I want to get out of this. I want to create something to suffer something. I would rather be in hell than here.’ And the attendant answered, ‘Where do you think you are?’ That is where our contemporary society is: in a hell of materialism, trying to satisfy the human heart with things that cannot bring lasting enjoyment.”

v. 12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king’s successor do than what has already been done?

As Solomon continued his pursuit to consider wisdom and madness and folly, he asked a question: “What can the next king do than what has already been done? I’ve done it all.”

v. 13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. Here Solomon gives us another observation, that wisdom is better than folly, even as light is better than darkness.

v. 14 The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

Now Solomon recognizes that both the wise man and the fool are going to die.

v. 15 Then I thought in my heart. “The fate of the fool will overtake me also.

What then do I gain by being wise?” I said in my heart, “This too is meaningless.”

Even as he has thought in his heart to test pleasure and to test wisdom, now again he thinks in his heart that the fate of the fool will overtake him as well. And then he asks the question: “What then do I gain by being wise?” There is no real meaning or purpose in the degrees after a person’s name. “I said in my heart, “This too is meaningless.”

v. 16 For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!



Bridges raise the question, “Would it not have been better for Solomon, instead of being weary of his life, rather to have been weary of his sin in seeking happiness in earthly things.”

Hubbard points out, “We toil to build our little pyramids of remembrance, our modest monuments to our wisdom and death sweeps over the terrain like a hot, dry sirocco and turns our pyramids into sand dunes, all of which look alike. And death, the ultimate reality, has one other vicious whim. It leaves all of our accomplishments for other to use.”

v. 17 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.

Solomon is telling us that he has a hatred for life itself and the reason being: work that is done under the sun is grievous. It is also meaningless and a chasing after the wind.

Charles Jones in his book Life is Tremendous says, “Do you know what I like? I like to relax. I like to talk about work. I like vacations, conventions, commissions, salary increases, long luncheons. What do I get? Headaches, heart breaks, turndowns. But do you know what I have been learning? If I don’t get excited about what I don’t like to do, I don’t get much that I do like to be excited about. I’ve been learning that life is not doing what you like to do. Real life is doing what you ought to do. I’ve been learning that people who do what they like to do eventually discover that what they thought they like to do they don’t like to do. But people who are learning to do what they don’t like to do but ought to do eventually discover that what they thought they didn’t like to do they do like to do.”

It was Mark Twain who said, “Life is just one darn thing after another.”

Again, in this verse Solomon uses all three of the key phrases: “under the sun,” “meaningless”, and “a chasing after the wind.”

v. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

In verse 17 he hated life and in verse 18 he hated all the things he had toiled for because he was going to have to leave them to the one who comes after him.

Luke 12:19-21 “And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come. Take your ease; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you. And who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Jerry White in his book Honesty, Morality & Conscience says “In college he grew a beard, wore overalls and dirty T-shirts and did drugs. Then he graduated, shaved his beard, bought a new blue suit, and joined the corporate treadmill. He married, had two children, joined the right clubs and bought a home in the suburbs. He sold his soul to the company. This his wife left him. He divorced her, became a playboy and then remarried. He was promoted by his company. He cheated on taxes, his travel reports and his wife. He did none of these things because he deeply wanted to or thought he should. Rather, they were the right things to do. They were acceptable. Everybody was doing them. Yes, he was very, very successful and very,

very unhappy. Life had become a masquerade. By now he hardly knew who he was. Come to think of it, he was a little bit of everybody. Although fiercely claiming independence, he actually would do nothing that might endanger his standing with his peers. He might well describe himself as American newspaper editor Emile Henry Gauvreau did: ‘as being part of that strange race of people aptly described as spending their lives doing things they detest, to make money they don’t want, to buy things they don’t need, to impress people they dislike.’ The influence of people on people is a powerful force, affecting everyone. Only the power of God and the innate drive for physical survival outrank it. A reasoning mind can become powerless in the face of this pressure. Even the most committed individualist conforms in some ways to the lifestyle of others.”

v. 19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

Solomon is coming to some very wise insights at this point about slaving for those material things which are only temporary and things which you are going to have to leave behind to someone else to enjoy.

v. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.

Dr. Pentecost in his book Man’s Problems and God’s Answers point out that “Man was created as a spiritual being when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And a spiritual being cannot be satisfied with material things. An ox was created to be nourished by grass but a lion was not. And you could dump bales of hay into the lion’s den and it would never nourish the lion. Or you could throw meat to the ox and the ox could never be nourished by it. Man is a spiritual being and even though he is spiritually dead, he still cannot be truly satisfied by material things. James says that those who pursue and love these material things will be miserable because things cannot bring happiness. God is the only one who can satisfy the longing of the human heart.”

James chapter 5: “Come now you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume you flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”

v. 21 For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

What is the use of leaving a lot for someone who will not use it wisely nor appreciate it? And so Solomon’s verdict is that it is meaningless and a great misfortune.

When it comes right down to the tough stuff of life, there are just a lot of things that BancAmericard, Master Charge or American Express cannot handle.

Psalm 73:25,26 “Whom have I in heaven but thee, and besides thee I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

There will be no cleaving to God until the vanity of all in comparison with Him has been experimentally acknowledged. O my God, may I feel the vanity of everything that turns away my heart from thee.

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

v. 22 What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?

What do you get for all of the toil and striving as you labor for material things under the sun?

Hal David, from the Broadway musical “Promises, Promises”, wrote a song called “I’ll Never Fall in Love Again” with the music by Burt Bacharach:

“What do you get when you fall in love? A guy with a pin to burst your bubble.  
That’s what you get for all your trouble. I’ll never fall in love again. I’ll never fall in  
love again.

What do you get when you kiss a guy? You get enough germs to catch pneumonia.

After you do, he’ll never phone you. I’ll never fall in love again.

Don’t tell me what it’s all about, ‘Cause I’ve been there and I’m glad I’m out, Out of those chains, those chains that bind you, That is why I’m here to remind you:

What do you get when you fall in love? You only get lies and pain and sorrow. So for at least until tomorrow I’ll never fall in love again. I’ll never fall in love again.

v. 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

He has become a workaholic.

What a description of many men today who find that their work is a pain and a grief. And even at night they bring their work and problems home with them. Their mind does not rest. And Solomon renders the same verdict: This too is meaningless.

The August 1974 issue of “Scientific American” included an important article entitled “The Origins of Alienation” by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Dr. Bronfenbrenner is, in my opinion, the foremost authority on child development in America today, and his views should be carefully considered. In this article Dr. Bronfenbrenner discussed the deteriorating status of the American family and the forces which are weakening its cohesiveness. More specifically, he is concerned about the circumstances which are seriously undermining parental love and depriving children of the leadership and love they must have for survival. One of those circumstances is widely known as the rat race. Dr. Bronfenbrenner described the problem this way: “The demands of the job that claim mealtimes, evenings and weekends, as well as days, the trips and moves necessary to get ahead or simply to hold one’s own, the increasing time spent commuting, entertaining, going out, meeting social and community obligations. All of these produce the situation in which a child often spends more time with a passive babysitter than with a

participating parent. According to Dr. Bronfenbrenner, this rat race is particularly incompatible with fatherly responsibilities, as illustrated by a recent investigation which yielded startling results. A team of researchers wanted to learn how much time middle class fathers spend playing and interacting with their small children. First they asked a group of fathers to estimate the time spent with their one-year-old youngsters each day and received an average reply of 15-20 minutes. To verify these claims the investigators attached microphones to the shirts of small children for the purpose of recording actual parental verbalizations. The results of this study are shocking. The average amount of time spent by these middle-class fathers with their small children was 37 seconds per day. Their direct interaction was limited to 2.7 encounters daily, lasting 10-15 seconds each. That, so it seems, represents the contribution of fatherhood for millions of American children.”

v. 24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.

v. 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

v. 26 To the man 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. A man who is eating and drinking and finding satisfaction in his work is a man who also has found a relationship with God, which pleases God. And God gives him wisdom, knowledge and happiness.

Oswald Chambers says, “Solomon sums the whole thing up as follows: ‘If I try to find enjoyment in this order of things, I end in vexation and disaster. If I try to find enjoyment in knowledge, I only increase my capacity for sorrow and agony and distress. The only way I can find relief and the right interpretation of things as they are is by basing my faith in God and by remembering that man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. He is the one who can transmute everything I come across.’”

Kidner points out, “As sovereign, however, it is God who has prescribed the frustrations we find in life. The treadmill of existence, which is pictured at the very outset of the book, ‘Stop the world, I want to get off’ probably is the feeling of most of us at times. But that treadmill is God’s appointment. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. All is vanity and a striving after wind. All of this comes from God – the general web of life and its minutest strands, whether these are to our liking and our sense of what is fitting or not. Sometimes they will make sense to us, for as a rule, the sinner comes in for an extra dose of frustration through God’s care of his own. But it remains a fact that nothing whatever is ours to command or to count on.”

It was John Newton who wrote the following poetic piece:

“My waking dreams are best concealed.  
 Much folly, little good, they yield;  
 But now and then, I gain, when sleeping,  
 A friendly hint that’s worth the keeping.

Lately I dreamt of one who cried,  
 ‘Beware of self, beware of pride;  
 When you are prone to build a Babel,  
 Recall to mind this little fable.’”

Once upon a time a paper kite  
 Was mounted to a wondrous height,  
 Where, giddy with its elevation,  
 It thus expressed self-admiration:  
 “See how yon crowds of gazing people  
 Admire my flight above the steeple:  
 How would they wonder if they knew  
 All that a kite like me can do!  
 Were I but free, I’d take a flight,  
 And pierce the clouds beyond their sight;  
 But, ah! Like a poor pris’ner bound,  
 My string confines me near the ground:  
 I’d brave the eagle’s towering wing,  
 Might I but fly without a string.”

“It tugged and pulled, while thus it spoke,  
 To break the string: - at last it broke!  
 Deprived at once of all its stay,  
 In vain it tried to soar away;  
 Unable its own weight to bear,  
 It fluttered downward through the air;  
 Unable its own course to guide,  
 The winds soon plunged it in the tide.  
 Ah! Foolish kite, thou hadst no wing,  
 How couldst thou fly without a string?”

My heart replied, “O Lord, I see  
 How much this kite resembles me!  
 Forgetful that by Thee I stand,  
 Impatient of Thy ruling hand;  
 How oft I’ve wished to break the lines  
 Thy wisdom for my lot assigns?  
 How oft indulged a vain desire,  
 For something more or something higher!  
 And but for grace and love divine,  
 A fall thus dreadful had been mine.”

Richard de Haan in his book [The Art of Staying Off Dead-End Streets](#) says,  
 Solomon declares that a man who believes in the God revealed in the scriptures will

find satisfaction in simple activities like eating, drinking and working. This is what he says in Ecclesiastes 2:24,25. A number of Hebrew scholars interpret these verses to mean, ‘There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and cause a soul to seek good in his labor. For even this, I saw, comes from the hand of God. For who can eat and enjoy himself apart from him.’ The man who recognizes that all he is and all he has comes from the hand of God can partake of the most simple fare with a grateful heart. He can look upon his labor, however menial, as having significance. While Solomon with all of his wealth and learning could not find contentment through human scholarship, sensual living, great achievements or cultural activities, an ordinary slave who knew the Lord could sit down with his family and take delight in a simple meal. He could eat and drink in gratitude, for he saw his provisions as coming from God’s hand. This man could find a sense of fulfillment, even though he spent the day hoeing weeds, carrying mortar, or cleaning a stable, for he performed his work as one who had been assigned a task by God himself.

### CONCLUSION:

It was Paul Harvey who said, “A thousand times reading the biographies of those whom the world called successful, I have been reminded that success is determined by how much you can dish out, and more by how much you can take, how much crow you can eat, how often you can turn the other cheek and somehow keep on keeping on.”

An unknown author put it so well: “On the plains of hesitation lie the bleached bones of thousands, who on the very threshold of victory and while resting, died.”

William H. Cook says, “Now it can be said, A success image is simply a byproduct of getting right and staying right with God. To be a success it is imperative to seek not more self-control but more Christ control. And not more self-centeredness but more Christ centeredness; not more self-esteem, but more Christ esteem; not more self-confidence, but more Christ confidence; not more self-power, but more Christ power; not more self-reliance, but more Christ reliance.

Christianity has well remembered some of the sterling characteristics of the apostle Paul. His best known qualities have been cited for centuries:

1. Appreciative – “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you”  
(Philippians 1:3)
2. Concerned – “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:3)
3. Considerate – “Wherefore if meat make my brother to offend, I will not eat flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend. (1 Corinthians 8:13)

4. Humble – “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints” (Ephesians 3:8)
5. Servant-like – “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:1)
6. Bold – “We were bold in our God to speak unto you” (1 Thessalonians 2:2)
7. Confident – “I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.”  
(Philippians 4:13)
8. Courageous – “I withstood him, Peter, to the face because he was to be  
blamed.” (Galatians 2:11)
9. Determined – “When stoned and left for dead, he got up and headed for the  
next town to preach again.” (Acts 14:19)
10. Excited – “He was persuaded that nothing could ever separate him from the  
love of God.” (Romans 8:38,39)
11. Follower of faith instead of feelings – “In the midst of a 14 day storm at sea,  
he exclaimed, ‘Sirs, be of good cheer for I believe God.’” (Acts 27:25)
12. Goal setter – “After three missionary journeys, he still wanted to go to Rome  
and later to Spain to carry on his work.” (Romans 15:24)
13. Happy – “When he looked forward to going to Rome where he knew he might  
die, he said, ‘That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God and may  
with you be refreshed.’” (Romans 15:32)
14. Motivator of others – To Philemon he wrote, “Having confidence in thy  
obedience I wrote unto thee.” (Philemon 21)
15. Persistent – Two years, while a captive of Rome, living in his own house,  
apparently with guards guarding him all the time, Paul continued preaching  
the kingdom of God. (Acts 28:30,31)
16. Positive thinker – “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)
17. Radiant – “I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and  
joy of faith, that your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ.”  
(Philippians 1:25,26) Twenty-five times in his letters he talks of his joy.
18. Satisfied with possessions – “For I have learned in whatsoever state I am  
therewith to be content.” (Philippians 4:11) “For I have all and abound”  
(Philippians 4:18)
19. Thrilled – “I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept  
the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown.” (II Timothy 4:7,8)
20. Victorious – “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work and will  
preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom.” (II Timothy 4:18)

I know many of these qualities are listed in our modern flurry of success books and I am delighted. I just consider it important that we remember these ideas originated with someone else, someone who was wonderfully in charge of giving daily direction to an apostle’s life nearly two thousand years ago.

Philippians 3:10-14 “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect (mature), but I press on in order that I may lay hold of

that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet. But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

What are the lessons we should learn from this particular study?

LESSON #1: The pursuit of pleasure will only leave you thirsty.

LESSON #2: Cheering oneself with wine and folly will end in futility.

LESSON #3: There is no real purpose in becoming a workaholic.

LESSON #4: There is no satisfaction in possessions and pleasures.

LESSON #5: There is a frustration of leaving everything you have acquired to others who will not appreciate it.

LESSON #6: A man can only find satisfaction in his work when he is doing it for the glory of God.

Colossians 3:23,24 “What you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord, rather than for men. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

Lutzer in his book Failure: the Backdoor to Success says, “Finally, let the words of Peter Marshall become your motto: ‘It is better to fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than to succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail.’ Better to love God and die unknown than to love the world and be a hero. Better to be content with poverty than to die a slave to wealth. Better to have taken some risk and lost than to have done nothing and succeeded at it. Better to have lost some battles than to have retreated from the war. Better to have failed when serving God than to have succeeded when serving the devil. What a tragedy to climb the ladder of success only to discover that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. God specializes in the impossible. When we positively accept his grace, our failures can be turned into success. Only a big God can do such big miracles. Isn’t it time we shed the grasshopper complex? After all, god specializes in success, not failure. “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. (Psalm 113:7, 8)