



ECCLESIASTES: THE ENIGMA OF LIFE UNDER THE SUN | THE QUESTION OF ACHIEVEMENT

February 2, 2025

We're in the midst of a series focused on the book of Ecclesiastes, and the author of Ecclesiastes — whereas my friend Rick likes to refer to him as the “professor” of Ecclesiastes — easily could have been a New Yorker, because he's bold enough to say what you're thinking. The professor takes an unflinching look at life as it really is. He's willing to ask honest, searching questions about the baffling realities of the human condition and the seeming pointlessness of it all, and he refuses to accept the often trite and superficial answers we might give to the big questions. But contrary to what you might think at first, the professor's goal is not to drive you to despair but rather to lead you to the only source of hope.

As we've seen, the professor engages in a quest to try to figure out if there is any meaning, any significance, any purpose to this life. You could put it like this: Some people pursue a pleasure-based life. They're trying to maximize leisure and pleasure. That's why you make the money that you do — because you want to enjoy experiences like good food, great wine, fun vacations, going on exciting trips to exotic destinations. So you're trying to pursue pleasure. Others might live a cause-based life. You want to gain wisdom and knowledge in order to pursue some righteous cause. You're going to fight for justice. You're going to seek truth. You're going to build awareness, because that's what's going to give your life meaning. You want to make the world a better place.

What's interesting is that the professor says that he tried all that, and it didn't work. First he pursues pleasure, then he pursues wisdom, and then he takes up the question of achievement. And in many ways, this is the driving question that the professor asks at the very beginning of Ecclesiastes, and it animates the entire book. He says in Ecclesiastes 1:3, “What does a person gain from all their toil?” We throw ourselves into various projects at home, at work, at school in order to try to achieve something, but at the end of the day, what have you actually accomplished? What do you have to show for your life?

The passage that is before us today reveals just how difficult and confusing this book can be, because at first the professor tells it like it is and reveals the utter futility of our achievement, but then he immediately turns around at the end and starts talking about the joy and the satisfaction that can be found in our achievements. So which one is it? Is everything a waste of time, or is there value in what we do? The answer is yes. The answer is both. But how? Let's see what we can find out.

As we turn to Ecclesiastes 2, I'd like us to consider: 1) *the futility of achievement*, 2) *the enjoyability of achievement*, and 3) *the salvageability of achievement*.

¹⁸I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?

Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³For 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.

²⁴There 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, ²⁵for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For 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, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

The Futility of Achievement

First, let's consider the futility of achievement. As we saw earlier in chapter two, the professor of Ecclesiastes was incredibly successful and accomplished. He says in verse four, I made great works. I built houses and vineyards and gardens and parks and pools. So this was a person who had status and wealth and resources and ability, and he accomplished more than most of us would probably ever dream of. But now he looks back on all that he's achieved, and he says, I hated it. I hated all my toil under the sun. And he gives us at least three different reasons why, beginning in verse 18. Some of them are a little funny; it's sad, but true.

Number one we can all relate to. Imagine you dedicate your life to building something — and it could be anything. You could say, I'm going to build a family, or a career, or an expertise. I'm going to build a lab. I'm going to build a portfolio, a collection. I'm going to build a company. I'm going to build a business. I'm going to build a movement. I'm going to build a church. It could be anything. But then you get to the end of your life, and what do you have to do? Whatever it was you built, you have to pass it on to someone else, and you don't have any control over what your successor does with what you've built. And the professor says, let's face it, your successor might be a complete and total idiot. How do you know if your successor will be wise or a fool? This, to him, seems like vanity.

Or number two, let's say you work hard. You apply all your wisdom, all your knowledge, all your skill to do something as simple as to save up a little nest egg, or maybe as significant as to amass a great fortune, but then you reach the end of your life, and what do you have to do? You might leave it to someone who didn't work for it and who doesn't deserve it. They might squander everything you've saved. And so the professor concludes, again, this also is vanity and a great evil.

The third reason why he says he hated all of his toil under the sun is more general. In verse 22 he asks, what kind of return on investment do we get for all of our striving of heart? That's how he refers to our work — this striving of heart. What do we get

in return for all of our toil? He says, well, not much. We get days filled with sorrow and vexation of heart, and even at night, our heart doesn't rest. You might finish a long day, and even at night, you can't sleep. You're tossing and turning in bed. Why? Because you're just anxious and worried about the next day.

So to one degree or another, we experience the futility of all of our achievements. And why is that? I would suggest that a primary reason why work, achievement, accomplishment is so vexing is because every one of us, deep down, is looking for our achievements to address a deep human need. Now let me give you a couple examples. It could be that we look to our achievement to provide us with 1) *identity*, 2) *security*, or 3) *celebrity*. But in every case, all these attempts will fail every single time. So let me explain.

Identity

It's good, of course, to want to work hard, to hone your gifts, to apply your skills in order to accomplish some worthwhile goal. The problem is when you peg your identity to your achievement. Now I'll give you an example that is humorous, but it is actually quite vivid. Last week, I quoted a number of authors like Herman Melville and Leo Tolstoy. Today, I'll quote athletes. (See, I've got something for everybody here.) So let me tell you about Andre Agassi.

He was one of only a very small handful of people who won all four major titles in tennis — the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open. Now, despite all of his success, he said that hating tennis was a deep part of his life for a very long time. So he sounds just like the professor; despite all these achievements, despite all these accomplishments, I hated what I was doing. Why? Well, Agassi's father determined that he was going to become a professional tennis player from the day that he was born, because his father believed that this was the best way, the fastest way for their family to achieve the American dream. So this is not a joke. When Agassi was six months old, his father taped ping pong paddles to his wrist so that he would learn to bat a ball. By the time he was six years old, he was hitting 2,500 tennis balls a day. He was practicing for three to four hours. So he drops out of school in ninth grade and he turns pro. Once he turned pro, he won several lucrative endorsements, the most famous of which was the ad that he did for Canon, the camera company, and the trademark slogan for this ad campaign was, "Image is everything."

"Image is everything." Well, that slogan would prove to be rather ironic in light of Agassi's life story. You see, he published an autobiography in 2010 entitled, "Open," and in the biography, he revealed that he began losing his hair at the age of 17. Now, you might think that's no big deal. Who cares? I mean, join the club. It happens. But the image of success really was everything for Agassi, and he wrote in the biography that, as he was starting to lose his hair, "Every morning I would get up and find another piece of my identity on my pillow, in the wash basin, down the plughole." Now isn't that amazing? He didn't say, "I found another piece of my hair." No, "I found another piece of my identity" on the pillow, going down the drain.

Now, in the 1990s, Agassi was known for his hairstyle. He was known for this long lion's mane of hair. Well, guess what? Turns out, it was a toupée. He was wearing a

wig. And somehow he experienced a desperate fiasco the night before the finals of the French Open. So in 1990 he gets to the finals of the French Open for the very first time when this happened:

The evening before the match, I stood under the shower and felt my wig suddenly fall apart. Probably I used the wrong hair rinse. I panicked and called my brother Phillip into the room. "It's a total disaster!" I said to him. He looked at it and said he could clamp it with hair clips. It took 20 clips. "Do you think it will hold?" I asked. "Just don't move so much," he said.

Of course I could have played without my hairpiece, but what would all the journalists have written if they knew that all the time I was really wearing a wig? During the warming-up training before play I prayed. Not for victory, but that my hairpiece would not fall off.

With each leap, I imagine it falling into the sand. I imagine millions of spectators move closer to their TV sets, their eyes widening and, in dozens of dialects and languages, ask how Andre Agassi's hair has fallen from his head.

Well, you can imagine that if this is what was going on in the midst of the finals match at the French Open, he lost (although he did win the following year). But you see, it wasn't just about his hair. He said it was his identity that was going down the drain. He was losing his sense of self.

Now it sounds a little silly, but of course, we all know that this is real. Agassi had to be a certain way. He had to look a certain way. Image really was everything. So success, winning, achievement, these are all good things as far as they go; the problem is when you say, "I am my success, I am my victory, I am my image, I am my job, I am my art, I am my address," because when we do that, we're demanding that success and achievement deliver for us something that they never can. They cannot tell you who you are. And so if you build your identity on image or on reputation, or on success, you are setting yourself up for disaster, and here's why.

Security

We not only look to achievement for identity; we also look to achievement for security — to ensure that we're okay. You see, it's not only that we want to know who we are; it's that *they* have to think so, too, whoever *they* may be. We need the acceptance, the approval of other people in order to feel secure. So we're looking to achievement, then, for recognition, critical acclaim, esteem — from some "it" crowd — because we won't really feel secure unless *they* know, "I'm the kind of person who makes millions of dollars on Wall Street," or "I'm the kind of person who gets his paintings shown in this particular gallery," or "I'm the kind of person who can perform on this kind of stage," or "I'm the kind of person who lives in the Village or on Park Avenue or wherever," or "I've got a home in the Hamptons," or "I go on vacation in these places," or "I'm the kind of person who wears these kinds of clothes." *They* have to know. *They* have to affirm me, because that's the only way I know I'm going to be okay.

The problem, of course, is the more you need the acceptance and the approval of others, the more the grief sets in, because there's diminishing returns to the acceptance of others. It's never enough. You always need more, and so the anxiety, the pain, the worry only intensifies with time, and it will eat you alive from the inside.

Celebrity

So we look to achievement to provide us with some deep human need. It could be identity, it could be security, or here's a third: It could be celebrity. Deep down, we feel that if our life is going to mean anything at all, we need some kind of fame, some kind of renown. Somehow, some way, you have to leave your mark on the world. You have to create some kind of legacy. You have to know that you've made some kind of contribution to this planet. People need to know your name. You need to know that you've made the world a better place. But the problem is, as any successful person can tell you, even if you achieve all of your dreams, it might feel like nothing at all. Success simply doesn't satisfy; it just leaves you longing for something more.

So here's another illustration from the world of sports. Next Sunday, Super Bowl Sunday, Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs are trying to see if they can win a third Super Bowl in a row — a three peat. Nobody's ever done that before. But you might say, who cares? Tom Brady is often considered the greatest quarterback of all time. He appeared in the Super Bowl ten times. He won the Super Bowl seven times — more than anyone else. But back in 2005 after he had won his third Super Bowl and he was 27 years old, he was interviewed by the 60 Minutes correspondent Steve Kroft, who asked him about all of his successes. My son, Luke, reminded me of this quote. This was Tom Brady's response:

There's times where I'm not the person that I want to be. Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, "Hey man, this is what it is." I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think: God, it's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me?

And the correspondent asks, "What's the answer?" And Brady says, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew." Sounds like somebody should invite Tom Brady to church.

You see, this is Tom Brady's Ecclesiastes moment. He's saying, this can't be all there is. There's got to be more than this. This can't be all that it's cracked up to be. And the point is that everyone looks to achievement to meet a deep need, but all of those attempts will fail because we're asking our achievements to provide something for us that they never can. Success will not satisfy.

The Enjoyability of Achievement

So first, the professor shows us the futility of achievement, but then he suddenly turns, without any warning, and then speaks of the enjoyability of work and achievement and life. And nothing prepares us for this; it comes as a complete shock. He doesn't say, on the one hand, our achievements are often futile, but on the other hand, there's still something enjoyable about it. No, he just launches in after saying that all of our toil under the sun is nothing more than mist, nothing more than vapor.

Then he says, in verse 24, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”

Now at first glance, you might think perhaps he’s just quoting the way of the hedonist, the one who’s just seeking pleasure. Jesus quotes the way of the hedonist in the gospels, so maybe he’s doing the same thing. Maybe he’s basically saying, “The hedonist would say, ‘Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die,’ right? If death is inevitable, then just try to squeeze out as much pleasure from life as you can while you’ve still got time.” But no, he’s not quoting the hedonist, and he’s not being ironic here either. He’s being sincere. He really means it. On the one hand, it’s true that our work is often futile and frustrating, but on the other hand, a lot of good can still be found in it.

Christopher Wright is an Old Testament theologian, and he wrote this about this particular passage in his commentary on Ecclesiastes:

It seems that [the Professor] is doing here what he will do again and again. He is stating his alternative answer to the key question of [Ecclesiastes] 1.3. [“What does a person gain from all their toil?”] We know what his predominant answer is — that is clear throughout the book: life is [vapor], baffling and enigmatic. But he cannot get away from the foundational truths of his [Israelite] scriptural faith. He may not understand a lot about life in this world, but he still understands this, because it is axiomatic to his very identity as an Israelite: life is good, because it comes from the good God our Creator.

You see, that’s the key. There’s still a lot of good to be found in our accomplishments, so long as we receive everything as a gift from God’s hand. If we pursue achievement in order to provide us with identity, security, celebrity, lasting glory, we’re going to be let down every time. You know why? Because your job can’t tell you who you are. Your job can’t protect you from the world. Your job can’t give you renown, lasting glory. But on the other hand, if you receive work as a gift from God’s hand, then it finds its proper place, and that’s when we can experience real joy.

Christopher Wright goes on to say, isn’t it true?

Don’t we often find there is an intrinsic reward in doing a good job well? We get absorbed in a demanding project, we get busy, we draw on the stuff we know well, we deploy all our gifts and training, we expend great effort, we organize and cooperate with colleagues, we relish the pressure and the deadlines, we solve the problems and overcome the difficulties, we are satisfied with the steady progress, we keep the goal in mind, we focus and prioritize, we sacrifice other things and discipline our time, we get the job done – and we feel good about it (most of the time). It can be very fulfilling. “This is what I was made for,” we might think, even in exhaustion at the end of a busy day. And there is something creationally good about this too, something uniquely human, for it is the outworking of being made in the image of God.

So when it comes to the question of the futility versus the enjoyability of our achievements, the answer is that they’re both true. Our work is often futile and

frustrating, and yet our work is enjoyable. And it seems to me that, in order to get the balance right, we have to hold Genesis 1 and 2 in tension with Genesis 3. To me, it seems like there are some faith traditions that overemphasize Genesis 3 and neglect Genesis 1 and 2, or they overemphasize Genesis 1 and 2 and neglect Genesis 3. Here's what I mean.

Genesis 3 describes humanity's fall into sin because of humanity's rebellion against God, and as a result of that, our work falls under a curse. God says in Genesis 3,

¹⁷cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.

So do you see what the author Genesis is saying? You're going to work the ground, but it's going to be a source of pain for you, and no matter how hard you work, even if you apply all your skill, even so, sometimes all it will produce will be thorns and thistles. It'll seem utterly futile, and that can be deeply frustrating. And that explains that when you toil at anything, it might be deeply frustrating. When you're raising your kids, when you're going to school, when you're applying yourself to your work, when you're taking care of aging parents, sometimes it seems like we work so hard and we've got nothing to show for it. It's just thorns and thistles.

Everything seems futile, but then we have to hold that in tension with Genesis 1 and 2, because what do Genesis 1 and 2 tell us? Well, it reminds us that working, toiling, laboring is actually part of God's good creation. We can never forget that God presents himself as a worker, and the first thing he does is he places human beings in a garden to work it and to keep it. So work is one of the primary ways in which we reflect the image of God. God's a creative. God's an artist. He's a maker. He is a worker. So that means that whatever we do — at home, at work, at school, whether it's paid or unpaid, full-time or part-time, skilled or unskilled — no matter what we do, there is value in it, because it reflects the goodness of God, and it reflects the image we bear.

And when it comes to our paid employment, then, you have to remember that the purpose of your job is not to just provide you with money that you can give away to people who work in full-time Christian ministry. And the purpose of your job is not to just give you a platform to tell other people about Jesus, as good as those things are. No, the primary purpose of your work is to fulfill your primary calling as an imagebearer, and that's both a duty and a joy. And it's only then that we find enjoyment and satisfaction in our work and in all of our achievements — not when we're treating our achievement as a means to an end, to meet some deeper need, but rather when we receive it as a gift of God's grace, a gift from the hand of the good Creator God.

The Salvageability of Achievement

But here's the final question, then. If achievements can be enjoyable, but they're also futile and frustrating, then are they ultimately salvageable? We'll address this question more quickly.

What I want you to notice is that up until verse 24 of this chapter, the professor of Ecclesiastes has not used the word God once. He's had all these negative things to say about the seeming meaninglessness and vanity of life, but then he finally brings God into the picture in verse 24. And you might think that he would say, well, as long as you bring God into the picture, well then life does make sense, and you can be happy and content after all. But the professor is not nearly that naïve or simplistic. No, he's a realist, because he's saying what any believer would know, which is that even when you do bring God into the picture, there are so many things about life that still don't make any sense. Life continues to be a baffling enigma. And if that's true, then what hope do we have that our work can be salvaged from its futility? Can it be salvaged? Can it be saved? The answer is yes, and here's why.

Centuries after Ecclesiastes was written, the Apostle Paul will write Romans 8, and in it, in verse 20, he will say that the creation itself was subjected to futility. The whole world and all of our work, all of our toil, was subjected to a curse. But one day, the world itself will be liberated and set free. It will be set free from its bondage to decay. And how will it happen? Through Jesus. See, Jesus is presented as the second Adam, who succeeds where the first Adam failed. Jesus will also find himself in a garden one fateful day, but rather than choosing to go his own way, Jesus will say, "Not my will, but Yours be done," even though he knew that that would cost him his life. And what was the Father's will? What is Jesus' mission? Jesus' mission is to lift the curse from us by becoming a curse for us. And he embraces that calling, and he remains true to it the whole, long, lonely way to the cross, where he will bear our curse.

Paul says in Galatians 3, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." And so when Jesus is hung on a tree, he bears the curse of us — of all of creation. And I don't think it's an accident that when Jesus hangs on that cross, he wears a crown of what? A crown of thorns. An emblem of that curse. But he lifts the curse from us by bearing the curse for us, and by his resurrection from the grave, Jesus takes the first step to usher in a whole new creation where everything will be made new. And so the one achievement that truly matters is Jesus' finished work on the cross, and his finished work on the cross is what changes everything. And that's what gives meaning to everything we do now; nothing will be lost or wasted. Because consider this: When you put your trust in Jesus' finished work rather than your own — when you put your trust in Jesus' one final, ultimate achievement — you receive a new identity, a new security, and a whole new kind of celebrity.

See, when you put your trust in Jesus' achievements rather than your own, you receive a new identity. Finally now, for the first time, you know who you really are. You're a child of God. You belong to Jesus, and that can never change. Your status in God's eyes is fixed. It will not fluctuate. You have an identity that is rock solid.

And not only that, you receive a new security. Now, finally, for the first time, you know that you're safe. You know that you're secure. No matter what this world throws at you,

you're gonna be okay, because Jesus has you in his grip, and no one, no thing can ever snatch you out of his hand.

And believe it or not, when you put your trust in Jesus' achievement, you receive a whole new kind of celebrity. You want fame? You want renown? You've got it, because in Jesus, now you have lasting glory; the only one who matters, Jesus, knows your name. He sees you. He values you. He sings over you in love. What more could you want? What more could you ask for?

You see, that's what changes everything, and that's why Paul says in Colossians 3:23, no matter what you work at, no matter what you toil at, no matter what you're striving toward, do it all heartily as unto the Lord, not as unto people, because he's the one that you're ultimately serving, and he's the one that will ensure that everything you do now will last into eternity. That's how we find joy and satisfaction in our toil now, in anticipation of that day when Jesus will make all things new.

One of my favorite hymns is Joy to the World. We often sing it at Christmastime, but you could just as easily sing it in June as in December, because Joy to the World is not really about the first coming of Jesus; it's about the Second Coming of Jesus, when Jesus will finish the work that he started through his death and his resurrection. And so what do we sing? We sing,

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found.

Jesus lifts the curse from us by becoming a curse for us, and now he comes to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found. And in anticipation of that promise, we can now eat and work and enjoy what we're doing and find satisfaction in it, in anticipation of that day when he will make all things new.

Let me pray for us.

Father, as we come to this table, we acknowledge that oftentimes we do fall into the trap of looking to our achievement to meet a deep human need for identity, for security, and even for celebrity, but help us to see all afresh that these attempts will fail every time, because our achievements can never deliver what we're looking for, and only Jesus can. So we pray that you would help us to put our trust not in our achievements but in the finished work of the cross, so that we might receive the new identity, the new security, the new celebrity, the lasting glory that Jesus extends to us by sheer grace. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.