

Work Is But a Breath

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

- [0 : 0 0] Thank you, Jen, and thank you for bearing with us. It's a joy to worship with you. It is a little tight in here, but what's great about that is I can hear all of you sing really well.
- And it's such a privilege and a joy to worship together. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 2. We started this sermon series in this wonderful book in the Old Testament two weeks ago.
- Three weeks ago. We are in chapter 2, verses 12 to 26 this morning. Let me pray now for the reading and preaching of God's Word.
- Heavenly Father, we come to your Word again. We are weak, but you are strong. Our words are sometimes filled with untruths, but your Word is truth.
- And your Word gives life. We ask that you would make alive spiritually by your power every single soul here this morning as we listen to your Word.
- [1 : 2 5] Lord, we pray that you would humble us again. Remind us of our finiteness, our creatureliness, our mortality, so that we might know the end of our days and live with wisdom and humility.
- And point us to the good news of Jesus Christ. Exalt His name, the most precious gift you've given us. So that His name is exalted and trusted in.
- Amen. On every lip and by every heart here in this room. Help us now in Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you are able, please stand.
- And for the reading of God's Word, we'd like to stand to honor God as we read His Word. And I will read it out loud for us. Ecclesiastes chapter 2, verses 12 to 26. So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly.
- For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.
- [2 : 4 7] The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.
- Then 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. How the wise dies just like the fool.
- So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. I 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.
- And 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.
- [3 : 5 5] So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because 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. 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. 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. For apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 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, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

[5 : 04] This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. As I mentioned, we started our new sermon series three weeks ago, and the first week of the sermon, which introduced the entire series in this book of Ecclesiastes, we talked about how our life is but a breath.

That we are fleeting. That we are never filled as human beings. And that we will all eventually be forgotten. That's the reality of life in this fallen world as we work this cursed ground.

However, that might prompt some people to respond in a hedonistic way. Saying, well, if that's the case, and it's all futile and fleeting, then I'm just going to live a maximally pleasurable life and indulge myself in everything.

Well, that's what we saw in last week's passage. And the preacher of Ecclesiastes concluded that even after indulging in every conceivable pleasure and denying himself no pleasure that his eyes can see and desire, he concluded that even pleasure is but a breath.

No pleasure on earth can ultimately satisfy. It gives us diminishing returns and leaves us ultimately empty. Now, that reality then might prompt some people to respond, instead turning toward work.

[6 : 25] Trying to do something meaningful. Trying to make something of their own lives. And to leave a legacy. I'm going to be successful and I'm going to leave a mark on this earth.

That's where we are headed this morning in this morning's passage in Ecclesiastes 2.12-26. But the author of Ecclesiastes quickly bursts that bubble also.

And he tells us that work and all that we stand to gain from our work and our hard work are also heavy, a puff of breath.

A passing wind. Striving after wind. But then, he tells us something that he hasn't told us yet up to this point. And this is really the first light that we see, the light of hope that shines onto this darkness of Ecclesiastes, the despair that we've seen so far.

And it's just knowing that our work and what we gain from our work are but a breath, we should enjoy our work as a gift from God. And that's the amazing insight and wisdom we gain from this word.

[7 : 31] And how do we actually do that? How do we enjoy that work? That's what we're going to talk about. But first, before we get there, we're going to talk about how we will all be forgotten. The author of Ecclesiastes likes to remind us of that and keep us in our place.

And then he will tell us that we must leave it all behind. And then he tells us that we should enjoy our work. The preacher once again turns to assessing the merits of these three approaches to life, wisdom, madness, and folly in verse 12.

And he asks, does it matter at all whether you live as a wise man or a madman or a fool? And he begins the exploration with this question. For what can the man do who comes after the king?

As I've mentioned in the previous weeks, I think most likely the character of this book, the preacher, is King Solomon, who compiled some of these wise sayings.

And so I think he is thinking hypothetically about what his successor might do. And Solomon knows the answer, and he gives it. Only what has already been done. What can the man do who comes after the king?

[8 : 34] Only what has already been done. Here he is echoing what he said early in chapter 1, verses 9 to 10. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done.

And there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, see, this is new? It has been already in the ages before us.

Nothing we do is ever truly, in an absolute sense, novel. It's something like it has already been done before. Look at the things that Kamala Harris and Donald Trump are campaigning on.

What can the man do who comes after the king? Let's see what they promise. Harris promises to curb the emission of greenhouse gases and control climate change. That sounds a lot like Joe Biden before her, who provided hundreds of billions of dollars toward clean energy.

That sounds a lot like Barack Obama before him, who helped negotiate the Paris Climate Accords. That sounds a lot like Bill Clinton before him, who negotiated the Kyoto Protocol, in which developed countries promised to cut their carbon emissions.

[9 : 44] And that sounds a lot like what George H.W. Bush negotiated and signed, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. And that sounds a lot like what Ronald Reagan, who signed the Global Climate Protection Act of 1987.

So what Harris is promising to do is nothing new. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.

Democratic and Republican presidents in past years have all tried to solve this issue to no avail. Similarly, Donald Trump promises that he will end the Russia-Ukraine war as soon as he becomes president.

And that he will restore peace through strength and prevent World War III. Once again, campaign promises like that are nothing new. In 1916, Woodrow Wilson campaigned for re-election with this slogan, He kept us out of war.

Just 29 days after he was sworn in for his second term, U.S. declared war against Germany, joining World War I. After him, in 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt promised during his campaign, Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.

[10 : 55] But a year later, after Pearl Harbor was bombed, U.S. declared war on Japan and entered World War II. After him, in 1964, Lyndon Johnson said during his campaign he would not send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.

But later that year, he dramatically increased U.S. military presence in Vietnam, in the Vietnam War. After him, in 1968, Richard Nixon promised that he would end the Vietnam War and make peace with honor.

But he never did manage to end the Vietnam War. After him, in 2000, George W. Bush campaigned, saying that he would stop extending our troops all around the world in nation-building missions.

But in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, he started new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After him, in 2008, Barack Obama pledged to end the war in Afghanistan, only to increase the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan year after year in both his first and second terms.

After him, Joe Biden promised that he would end the forever wars. But now there are two more wars going on, in Ukraine and in Gaza, Israel. Sure, Israel isn't directly involved, but we've spent hundreds of billions of dollars and some U.S. soldiers have died, killed by Iran-backed terrorist groups.

[12:07] So what Trump is promising to do is nothing new. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.

The Democratic and Republican presidents in the past have all tried to end wars, but the warring nations pay no heed to such campaign promises. And the sinful nature of humanity does not change, apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Now, this doesn't mean that there is no point in trying to gain wisdom at all or trying to conduct ourselves with wisdom or to elect wiser rulers. Of course, there is a point in all that.

It's still better to be wise than to be foolish. And that's what the preacher says in verses 13 to 14. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.

The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. The wise person lives in light, and the foolish person lives in darkness.

[13:10] The wise person knows how to navigate life with wisdom, and he knows how to avoid the pitfalls of life. But the foolish person is ignorant and just stumbles through life, which is better.

Of course, wisdom is better. The preacher does not deny the superiority of wisdom in an ultimate sense, and this is consistent with the teaching of Proverbs. But here's the kicker at the end of verse 14.

And yet I perceive that the same event happens to them all. What is this same event? That happens to them all. It's death.

The preacher continues in verses 15 to 17. Then 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, how the wise dies just like the fool.

So I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and is striving after wind. Think about it this way. There are two drivers, and they're both going to die in a car accident today.

[14:23] But one of them is a very competent and careful driver. He slows down before the speed bumps. He checks the rear view mirror and the side mirrors as he is driving.

He hovers very close to the speed limit, and he doesn't speed. He stops at all the lights. And if you are in his car, you feel like this is the smoothest and safest ride you've ever been on.

And then there's the second driver. This is a reckless and foolish driver. When he is driving through the speed bumps, the car basically gets airtime. Now, he never checks any of the mirrors, and the cars are honking all over the place.

Oops, there goes a red light that I just ran. Now, which way of driving is better? Clearly, the wise way of driving is better, but they're both going to die today in a car accident.

So what's the point? That's the philosophical question that the preacher of Ecclesiastes is driving at. Do you feel the futility of it all? The wise person who works diligently and saves gradually and invests prudently and grows his or her wealth, and the foolish person who is lazy and then squanders her wealth and then becomes homeless, both of those people are going to die one day.

[15 : 50] And they'll have to leave it all behind. Death, as people say, is the great equalizer. And who is going to remember them? No one.

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. Even if you make something, an enduring contribution to the world, and you are memorialized or immortalized with a statue or a bust somewhere or a building named after you, one day someone's going to raise that building to make room for a new one, and they'll name it after someone else.

One day they will topple that statue because the values have changed, and someone else will be put up. Earlier this month, I saw an article about how the Chicago Bears legend, I don't know how many of you guys know this legend, Steve McMichael.

You guys know who this is? Not a single person. Chicago Bears legend, Steve McMichael, was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame earlier this month.

And you know what's sad? I saw a picture of the induction because he couldn't attend the ceremony in person. All his, in the picture, the man is bedridden in hospital because he's dying from ALS.

[17 : 14] While his wife and friends are surrounding him, they're smiling, and they're beaming with pride, and the wife is holding this bronze bust of him. Of course, it's modeled after when he was still young and handsome and athletic and muscular.

And he is a shell of himself now, just lying there in bed. And she's beaming at the bust and says, hey, look, this is you. This is you. This is you. Forever.

That's you forever. Isn't it beautiful? That's what the wife says. The scene is thick with irony. No, that bust is clearly not him.

Looks nothing like him now. And surely, it's not him forever. That recognition does not last forever. In fact, he's already in the process of being forgotten, as you can see.

He can't talk. He can't smile. He can't even turn to look at the bust. His wife has to grab his head and turn his head toward it. Do you really think the man in that situation cares that he just got into the Proof Football Hall of Fame?

[18 : 22] Whether you are rich or poor, famous or anonymous, a success or a failure, there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come, all will have been long forgotten.

That's the brutal reality of life in this fallen world. Maybe you're trying to invent something or start a new business that will be the next Amazon or Microsoft or Google or Apple.

Maybe you want to make a break, make some breakthroughs in AI or make some other lasting contribution to your academic field. Maybe you want to write a best-selling book. But no matter what we accomplish, the inescapable reality is that we will all be forgotten.

There is futility to our work that is woven into the very fabric of this fallen world. It's all a striving after wind. And if you keep chasing after that wind, seeking some sort of ultimate gain from the work that you do, then you will end up hating life, as the preacher says here.

And you will conclude that life under the sun is grievous. However, if we recognize this humbling truth and lean into the freedom of insignificance, the freedom of mortality, then instead of treating our work and what we stand to gain from work as a God, we can do our work and receive the gain from our blessings of our work as a gift.

[19 : 54] And that's the difference. The preacher of Ecclesiastes will elaborate on this a little later. But before we get to that, there's another sobering truth in verses 18 to 23.

Not only will we ourselves be forgotten, our life's work and all the wealth we've gained, we must leave it all behind. The preacher says in verses 18 to 19, I 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.

And 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. The certainty of death means that sooner or later, we must leave all our accomplishments and possessions behind.

But there is no guarantee that our successor will be wise, wise stewards of what we have passed down. Now, I think the preacher of Ecclesiastes, which I think is most likely King Solomon, was prescient in his realization because if you recall what happens right after King Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam takes over the throne and then people come and petition him to lighten their workload.

And Rehoboam, instead of listening to the wise counselors, the old man who used to serve in Solomon, his father's court, instead he spurns their counsel and then listens to the foolish young men who grew up with him and were standing now in his court.

[21 : 23] And because of that, the kingdom is split now, divided into northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah, and then it begins its downward spiral from there. And the zenith of the kingdom of Israel, which Solomon enjoyed, is no longer to be found.

Similarly, Clint Murchison Jr. Murchison Jr. was the son of an oil tycoon who inherited \$200 million after his father's passing in the late 1960s, adjusted for inflation that would be worth over \$400 million today.

But unlike his father, who invested his money wisely, Murchison Jr. frittered away his money on passion projects and failed ventures, and by 1985, he had filed for bankruptcy. He liquidated all of his assets to repay his debt, and he died two years later penniless.

Both him and Rehoboam destroyed their wiser father's legacies. All of us, as mortals, face this predicament. Perhaps you work hard to get a PhD, and then a postdoc, and then you gain a tenured professorship at an esteemed research university, and then you get a lab named after you.

But what happens to all of it after you die? Someone will take over your lab. The lab will be renamed. And who knows whether your successor will be wise or foolish, whether they will see any value in the research you are doing at all.

[22 : 51] Maybe they decide to scrap it all. We're going to go in a different direction. What's the point, then, of all your hard work, all your worries, and late nights?

He says in verses 22 to 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. What is there for us to gain in all the work that we do? Why do we stress out and endure sleepless nights for the sake of our work?

It's no wonder that the preacher says in verse 20, So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair. Despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun. This is the only place in the book of Ecclesiastes where we find the word despair.

And note the repetition of this phrase, under the sun. It occurs four times from verses 17 to 20, and all in the context of the most despairing, hopeless statements of the preacher.

[23 : 54] And this is no accident. Life under the sun, life here in this fallen world is but the merest breath. It is fleeting, and it is futile. That is the inescapable condition of this cursed ground, which we have been consigned to work.

And Christians and non-Christians alike must grapple with the reality of this fallen world every single day. And the preacher's reaction to this futility is very strong.

Twice, he says he hates this kind of life. He says in verse 17, so I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. And again in verse 18, he says, I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun.

These are the only two places in the book of Ecclesiastes where the preacher says he hated his life and work. But this most desperate and dark and despairing passage occurs immediately before the first light of Ecclesiastes, which shines through in this next few verses.

And here's that first light in verse 24 and verse 25. 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 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment.

[25 : 10] This is the first of what is known as five Carpe Diem passages. You guys have heard the phrase Carpe Diem, right? C is the day from Latin. And there's five such passages in the book of Ecclesiastes.

And it's an exhortation to take advantage of your present opportunities and to enjoy life today while it still lasts rather than counting on tomorrow which may never come.

This is different from hedonism which pursues pleasure as the highest good. We saw the programmatic end of hedonism in last week's passage where Solomon recounts his foray into the pleasures and self-indulgence.

He says he kept his heart from no pleasure and indulged in all that his eyes desired. Alcohol, gardens, parks, pools, possessions, jewelry, treasures, music, sex. He tried them all and he still concluded it's all vanity and there is nothing to be gained in them.

The pleasures of this world cannot ultimately fail or satisfy us. The preacher already knows this so this is not a hedonistic despair. But he's saying something different when he says there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

[26 : 22] The word toil is a key word in this book. It occurs almost 30 times in the book and it captures the fallen condition of humanity in the world. Our work in this world is toil and hardship because of Adam's sin.

Remember what happened after Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden. Now you must work the ground with the sweat of your brow and it will yield to you thorns and thistles. That's what toil looks like.

You till the ground and you sow the seeds by the sweat of your brow but it still yields thorns and thistles. There is a pain and there is a futility in all of our labors under the sun. And for that reason the very first real philosophical question of the book of Ecclesiastes was this in chapter 1 verse 3.

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What do we have to gain from this? And the word gain is a translation of a Hebrew word that means profit.

It's an economical term. Profit or advantage. It conveys the human desire to make a profit. To leave a surplus. To get to the bottom line of the ledger and to have a black number there instead of a red one.

[27 : 29] But because we live in a world that is hevel, that is mere breath, there is actually nothing to be gained. So the preacher says instead there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

What does that look like? We tend to treat life as a means to gain control. As a means to get ahead.

We tend to use the world around us as leverage for attaining our own goals. We see our relationships and our degrees and our internships and jobs all as stepping stones for the next thing to the greater things.

But what if God gives us these things not to be used or mastered but simply to be enjoyed? What is our work and indeed life itself if it's not a means of gain but a gift to be enjoyed?

That's the meaning of verses 24 and 25. This also I saw is from the hand of God for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

[28 : 47] Our toil and all our eating and drinking come from the hand of God. In the despairing passages of chapter 2 there's not a single mention of God at all.

But here in verses 24 to 26 God is mentioned three times in quick succession. and it's the presence of God that transforms our entire perspective on life and enables to enjoy these things as gifts rather than employing them for personal gain.

In fact two other Carpe Diem passages 3.13 and 5.19 explicitly use the word gift as a contrast to the word gain. It says that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil.

this is God's gift to man. This is the main point of the book of Ecclesiastes and if you get it it is profound. If you see life as the marketplace or the trading floor for gain then we will live consumed and acquisitive lives that are never satisfied.

But if we receive life along with all its toils along with all the joys and woes and the highs and lows as a gift then we will be able to enjoy life and laugh along the way.

[30 : 06] This life is still only a breath. As pastor and professor Ian Proven puts it quote the gift of God does not make this meaninglessness go away. We do have purpose and meaning but in the sense that the fallen world the condition of this fallen world doesn't change until the renewal of the new heavens and the new earth.

So the meaninglessness of this life doesn't go away the gift of God does not make it go away but the gift of God makes this vanity enjoyable. When we let the certainty of death and the consequent futility of life instill in us the wisdom of humility and the freedom of insignificance then we can enjoy our work as a gift from God.

We stop seeing our children as a means for gain as a way for proving our superiority or gaining social standing or as a way of lifting ourselves up above others.

Oh your baby started walking at seven months? Mine started walking and swimming at five months. Oh your daughter went to UMass with a scholarship?

My daughter skipped two grades and went to Harvard at 15, 16. Then instead of running the rat race this rat race of life and driving our kids mad by our own insatiable lust for success and pushing them to be kids that we want them to be instead of receiving them as gifts that God has given as they are with all their idiosyncrasies and quirks in all their strengths and weaknesses.

[31 : 51] That's the difference. When we stop seeing our work as a means for gain as a way of making something of yourself to prove yourself to leave a lasting legacy then instead of relating if we were to give up that perspective instead of receive it as a gift then instead of relating to our colleagues and fellow students as competitors to beat we can relate to them as neighbors to love.

Instead of working ourselves to death for this ephemeral gain we can actually enjoy our work along the way. Most of the musicians who were popular in the 80s have long stopped performing.

Many of them have been long forgotten. Some of them are already dead. but there is a musician who is still performing and making headlines dubbed the Queen of Pop Madonna with sales of over 400 million records worldwide that's almost four times as much as Taylor Swift.

Can you imagine that? She's a best selling female recording artist of all time. She's the most successful solo artist in history for the U.S. Billboard 100 chart with 44 number one singles.

She's the first woman to accumulate one billion dollars in concert revenue. She was named by Forbes the highest paid female musician a record 11 times across four different separate decades.

[33 : 17] She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008. She has even won a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress. But she's still not done. An article from October 14, 2023 is entitled Madonna Celebrates Four Decades of Hits with Career Spanning Spectacle.

An article from May 16, 2024 is entitled The Nerve of Madonna to Pull It Off Again. She's 66 years old. Why does she keep going?

An interview she gave to Vanity Fair in 1991 gives us some clues. Don't worry, I don't read Vanity Fair. I found this in another book I read. This is what Madonna said then.

I have an iron will and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting.

Again and again my drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre and that's always pushing me, pushing me because even though I become somebody I still have to prove that I'm somebody.

[34 : 30] My struggle has never ended and it probably never will. 1991 still going in 2024. If anybody has made it by our society and culture standards it's Madonna.

Yet she feels that she is mediocre and uninteresting and inadequate. That's the sad picture of what it looks like to make your work your idol. Working, making your work your God instead of receiving it as a gift.

I can assure you that Madonna is not enjoying her toil as a gift. To her it's a cruel necessity and an obsession. There's nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

I recall seeing an ad recently for prepared meal delivery services. I don't know if you guys do this. It went something like this. Well you don't want to eat unhealthy fast food and you don't have the time and the energy to go out with your friends to a restaurant so use this prepared meal service and have it delivered to your door.

That was the logic of the advertisement. Now I don't want to condemn you if you've used services like this. I've gotten some free samples myself in the past. But we all lead busy lives.

[35 : 50] But what if we didn't see food and drinks as a means for gain as necessary fuel so that we can continue working but instead we receive them as gifts in and of themselves to be enjoyed.

1 Corinthians 10 31 does not say eat and drink so that you can do something for the glory of God. No it says so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do do all to the glory of God.

We're even supposed to eat and drink to the glory of God. Note that this is not the same as the fatalistic hedonistic perspective that is critiqued in 1 Corinthians 15 32 let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.

That's not a biblical perspective. We don't eat and drink because there's nothing better to do. We eat and drink because they are gifts from God for us to enjoy. What if you decide for yourself one day that instead of choosing from a menu that someone else has curated for you, you choose for yourself what you're going to make that day?

What if instead of just buying food that someone else has made, what if you decided one day to cook your food? What if you slowed down enough one day to actually enjoy the food you made instead of scarfing it down and run to your next appointment?

[37 : 10] What if you took it even one step further? You took after Lance and Shelley and grew your own food and raised your own chicken? Award winning novelist, poet, and cultural critic Wendell Berry writes this in a chapter entitled Pleasures of Eating in his book What Are People For?

He says this, eating with the fullest pleasure, pleasure that does not depend on ignorance, is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.

I haven't gone fishing in 20 years, that's sad, but somebody, somebody somewhere caught the tuna that I had yesterday, and God ultimately put that tuna there in the seas so that that fisherman can catch it, and tuna tastes pretty bland and squishy by itself, but you put it over a little bit of rice, and you dip that thing in a little bit of soy sauce, and you eat that with some pickled ginger and wasabi, oh my goodness, that's a delicious sushi.

Or kale. Kale tastes like tough grass by itself, but you drizzle some olive oil on that thing, and sprinkle some salt on it, and you put it in the oven for a little bit, oh, that tastes better than any chip you can buy in the grocery store.

Who said no? God created this vast world and filled it to the brim with things we can eat and drink, and then he gave us up to 10,000 taste buds so that we can enjoy them.

[39 : 00] Only if we humbly acknowledge our mortality and slow down enough to savor. On February 1st, 2021, Pastor Tim Keller came on Kevin DeYoung's podcast, Life and Books and Everything, to talk about a number of things, and at one point, Keller reflects on being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

He would actually claim his life a few years later after this interview. And then he talks about how pancreatic cancer diagnosis completely changed his and his wife's perspective on life and the way they orient themselves.

He confesses this. He says, I always rested my heart, frankly, in ministry accomplishments, ministry goals. Hey, we've done this. We got this started.

We moved to that. In other words, I really tried to turn this world into heaven. I was trying to make heaven out of the earth. And as a result of that, I was always unhappy.

I was never enjoying my day because I was always thinking about tomorrow and all the stuff I have to get done and how I'm behind. And what's happened with the cancer is that suddenly we can't make a heaven out of this earth because it's going to be taken away from us.

[40 : 15] It just jolts you so much that you say, I got to make heaven my heaven. I got to make God my heaven. And here's what's really weird. When you actually make heaven heaven, the joys of the earth are more poignant than they used to be.

That's what's so strange. We enjoy our day more than we ever did. We look out on the water here, the East River for example. There's a whole lot of things that we never really enjoy that much.

The more we make heaven out of the real heaven, this world becomes something we're actually enjoying for its own sake instead of trying to make it give us more than it really can.

So oddly enough, we've never been happier. Day to day, we've never enjoyed our days more. We've never enjoyed hugs more. We've never enjoyed food more. She'll say, this would be great to make.

We've never enjoyed walks more. We've never enjoyed the actual things. We see, touch, taste, hear, and smell around us more. It's almost like, why? What's the matter with us? And the answer is, we got our hearts off of those things, so weirdly enough, we enjoy them more.

[41 : 25] That's the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Helen Lemel's wonderful hymn is still true. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful grace, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

That is true. When we come to grips with our mortality and stop making idols and gods of the things of earth, when we stop trying to make the good things that God has given us, God things that rule our lives, lo and behold, not only do the things of earth grow dimmer, we also get to enjoy the things of earth that God's given to us as gifts.

And God loves to lavish His good gifts to us, doesn't He? That is His mode of operation. In fact, even our salvation is a gift. The default mode of the human heart, unfortunately, is to grind, is to earn our salvation as our keep, rather than receiving it freely as a gift.

In 1510, Martin Luther climbed the marble steps of the Scala Sancta in Rome. He climbed the 28 steps on his knees, on each step reciting the Lord's Prayer, because he wrongly believed that if he were sincere enough and if he were devoted enough and if he climbed that stairs enough times by his act of devotion that he might be able to redeem a soul from purgatory.

Later in life, Luther learned not only that there is no such thing as a purgatory, but that that is not how God saves His people. Not by doing some great works of piety like climbing the Scala Sancta, but by the grace of God, salvation is received as a gift through simple faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

[43 : 14] And that's why Jesus never instituted the Scala Sancta as a sacrament that we should observe. He instituted instead the Lord's Supper as the sacrament, and in doing so, He dignified the simple and regular act of eating and drinking.

This is what He said in Matthew 26, 26-28. Jesus took bread and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, take, eat, this is my body.

And He took a cup and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them saying, drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. In the same way that the foods that we eat and the drinks that we drink are gifts from God for us to enjoy, so the body and blood of Christ, body broken for us, the blood shed for us, are gifts for us to receive freely for our eternal joy.

It's not our own sacrifice that saves us, but the sacrifice of Christ. It's not our own body and blood that saves us, but the body and blood of Jesus Christ. If you think of your salvation as gain instead of as a gift, if you live in order to justify yourself, to obey enough and to be righteous enough to earn your keep, then you will end up despairing.

All is vanity and a striving after wind. Because you can never do quite enough. But if you trust in Jesus alone for your salvation, that he died on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins and that he was raised from the dead, you can receive salvation as a gift from God.

[44 : 54] Then, the sacraments, the eating the bread and drinking the blood, the spiritual disciplines, prayer, scripture reading, corporate worship, fellowship, and participation in the community of God's people, these things no longer feel like a drudgery or an onerous burden that you must bear.

Rather, they become gifts that you can enjoy, that gives life and freedom. God has given his only son to us.

What more can heaven give? So let's enjoy these gifts today. Let me pray. Father, we confess that we so often think that we know better than you.

We drive ourselves seeking satisfaction and fulfillment, thinking, oh, we have no time to lose. this is the only way, and I know the way.

But Lord, your ways are always higher than ours. So humble us, oh, Lord God, to know our own impending death, and even more importantly, to know the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

[46 : 28] So we can truly say that for us, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Help us. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Okay.