

I can't get no satisfaction

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Quite a depressing message, isn't it? Let's see whether there's any ray of light in it.

Let's pray. Father, we know, Lord, that every word, Lord, in the Bible comes from you, and that, Father God, they have been given to us for our instruction, and they are given to us to bless us. We thank you, Lord, that all your word in the scriptures point to Jesus. And so, Father God, we just look to you to ask us to understand your word and to open our eyes, Lord, to what you have to say to us.

Even as we live in this world where many things do seem meaningless, help us, Father God, to find that that you want us to do as your people.

In Jesus' most precious name, we pray. Good morning, brothers and sisters. I'm Hong Park, one of the elders of this church, and I'll be bringing to you the word of God. Now, what is the one thing that motivates most of our actions?

[1 : 11] If you could, you would seek out your favourite breakfast and coffee. And if possible, you would take the route that avoided all traffic jams, especially in Kuching nowadays.

You would sit in a place that will be not too cold or too warm for you. In all our endeavours, holding down the right job, looking out for the perfect spouse, planning a family, refinishing the house, making the itinerary for a little holiday, hitting the gym, our desire is to be happy.

Everything we do, we have one aim, whether consciously or unconsciously, and it is to be happy. And we can live with delayed happiness. So, we put up with temporary stress and pain, with the conviction that happiness will follow. And that is the great human pursuit, happiness.

Some people strive with all their energy, all their time, with the belief that if they gain more money, more pleasure, more wisdom, more success, more toys, more possession, more fun, then they will be really, really happy.

[2 : 50] Will they really? In the sermon last week, the teacher declared life as meaningless, utterly meaningless.

And we learnt that the Hebrew word for meaningless was hebel, which means breath. It refers to something insubstantial, fleeting, something that quickly vanishes.

If you may know, that's what the pastor said. When we say something is hebel, we are saying that it is of fleeting value, that it will ultimately come to an end.

But that doesn't mean that what is hebel is completely useless or unimportant. A single breath may not have permanent value, but in its one moment, it keeps us alive.

It has great importance. When we say this life is hebel, this life has real significance, but a temporary significance.

[4 : 04] When we say something is hebel, it also means that it is incomprehensible, enigmatic, something impossible to grasp.

It's like trying to hold on to the wind. Something that evokes the question, why? But with no obvious satisfactory answer.

Things which are difficult for us to accept or comprehend, like the slaughter of innocent children in a school shooting. Meaningless. In this passage today, the teacher has one agenda.

In chapter 2, verse 1 and 3, he is determined to find out what is good. What is good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

He wanted to see if there is perhaps a way of living life that will bring lasting happiness or satisfaction, that will make it possible for some form of gain that might give some meaning to life or to make life less hebel.

[5 : 23] And remember who the teacher was. He is the king in Jerusalem. Being king, he had all the resources for his search at his disposal.

Money, manpower, time. And he sets off on several paths to see if any will be profitable and good for people to pursue during the few days of their lives.

And he considers the path that pursues wisdom, pleasure, and wealth. The teacher first takes the path of enlightenment, the pursuit of wisdom.

Throughout his search, wisdom is his constant tool in all the different paths that he took. In 1.13, he said, I applied my mind to study and explore my wisdom.

In 2.3, he said, My mind still guiding me with wisdom, even as he indulged in alcohol. In 2.9, he said, In all this, my wisdom stayed with me.

[6 : 39] He used his mind to evaluate the value of wisdom itself. In 1.17, 2.2, and 2.12, wisdom was his constant companion.

In 1.13, he applied his mind to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. Okay? That means all that is done in this life.

This need to look for meaning in life is a burden God had laid on mankind. Right?

All of us are looking for this meaning in life. And it is a miserable and unhappy task. Like all work, this task is painful toil, a result of the punishment for Adam's sin.

In 1.16, it tells us that he is not a lazy student or a careless researcher or a lightweight intellectual.

[7 : 48] He pursued wisdom and knowledge to such great heights that he became wiser than any other ruler over Jerusalem before him. He was the model overachiever.

Now, perhaps, if he truly applied his mind to explore with wisdom all the activities that people do under the heavens, he might uncover the way to make life profitable.

Perhaps to gain something of lasting value that was not Hebel, that will not just vanish away.

Perhaps he will understand the animatic issues of life, why things happen the way they do.

Why does SGH have a 30-bedded and a well-occupied ward just for children with cancer? And yes, some are children of Christians.

Why is this godly couple still childish even though they have been begging God for a child? While in the same clinic, there is a man forcing his partner to abort.

[9 : 06] What did all his intellectual pursuit get him? Did he understand life better? Verse 14, he said, After he had finished studying all the things that were done under the sun, he still could not wrap his mind around its meaning.

It was still Hebel, an impossibility to grasp, like chasing after the wind. He had no comfort to offer those in pain or suffering.

And why could he not achieve his goal even after reaching the peak of the intellectual world? Verse 15 tells us, Human wisdom is limited and it is limited by God.

Verse 15 is a proverb which says, What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. Crooked here means inscrutable, unknowable, rather than ethically wicked or corrupt.

Okay? So crooked here means you can't, it's something that's unknowable. And this proverb means that there are things that are simply unknowable and impossible to unravel or make straight.

[10 : 37] trying to do so is like trying to count what is lacking. The second part of the proverb, what is lacking cannot be counted.

I asked my son to ask me to count the coins on this table but actually there are no coins on this table. Right? I cannot count something which is not there. What is lacking cannot be counted.

It is a pointless effort. In Ecclesiastes 7.13, the teacher says that God has made, what God has made crooked, man cannot straighten.

Aha! It is God who has decided there are things that are not meant for us to know or to understand why. He is the one who made some things crooked and we cannot straighten it.

There will always be aspects of life in a fallen world that remains mysterious. There is simply things which are unknowable because God has not revealed them and things that are unchangeable because God has ordained them so.

[11 : 54] And as humans, we must accept the limits God has placed on us. There are things that belong only to God. And wasn't original sin Adam and Eve wanting to be God?

And if you think accumulating wisdom and knowledge will give you happiness, think again. This is what the teacher realised in verse 18. With much wisdom comes much sorrow.

the more knowledge, the more grief. Sorrow and grief were his reward, not happiness. Ironically, it was his learning that helped him see with distressing clarity the enigma of this sin-damaged world. The unfairness, the injustice, the suffering and pain of existence, the fleeting nature of life, and the unbending rules that God has placed in the natural world.

He had no answers for them. In verse 17, he couldn't change things. It brought him despair. It was a chasing after the wind. Is there value in wisdom then?

[13:18] Should we perhaps just close schools and universities? In chapter 2, verse 12 to 13, he compares wisdom against folly.

He saw that wisdom is still better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. My goodness, what a contrast, light and darkness.

Verse 14 says, the wise have eyes in their heads. Learning and knowledge and wisdom helps people see clearly.

It shows us the right path to take, the good way forward, the dangers ahead, the righteous thing to do, how we can please God and obey him.

The fool, they walk in darkness, lost. Wisdom will eventually help the teacher gain an alternative perspective for the good life, but not yet.

[14:26] The teacher then takes another path. his quest remains the same, to find out what is good, what is good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

Chapter 2, verse 1, he said to himself, come now, I will test you with pleasure. pleasure. The word translated pleasure is also translated joy and happiness, and it is a gift from God.

In chapter 2, verse 26, the word pleasure here does not have to carry the connotation of things forbidden or questionable. and his guiding mindset when he pursued this path, chapter 2, verse 10, I will not deny myself anything my eyes desire, and I will not refuse my heart any pleasure.

That was his motto. If he makes pleasure his primary goal in life, strive for it, and if necessary, even labor for it, would it give him a return for his investment?

Would he get surplus joy at the end of it on the balance sheet? Chapter 2, verse 1, in the same sentence, he gives us a summary of it, he tells us immediately what he found, and no, it's a bummer.

[15:59] it also proved to be meaningless, a pointless endeavor. And here is a record of what he did. Chapter 2, verse 2 to 3, the first thing he did, he started off hitting the comedy clubs of Jerusalem to get a good laugh.

And then it was the pubs and the bars to cheer himself with alcohol. And he joins in some stupid activity for fun. But he did not lose his mind, his mind still guided him with wisdom.

And what did he find? In the same verses, laughter is madness, pleasure accomplishes nothing. This kind of enjoyment was transient.

The highest of intoxication and a jolly good laugh wore off quickly and left him the same or worse. It was only fun while it lasted.

And then it was back to the drudgery of life. the teacher decided, now, now, now, these ways of having fun and pleasure seeking are rather bottom tier.

[17:17] Let me go big. Let me seek my joy and pleasure in a grander and a greater manner. After all, I'm the king and I have resources and money and money is no issue.

After all, I have herds and flocks, silver, gold and other treasures. I have them in plenty, more than those who rule before me. So, let me go for something grand.

We all try to change our environment so that things can be more pleasant for us, pleasing to our eyes and to meet our perceived needs and wants.

Right? Some of us change jobs, we move to a new city or a new condo or a nicer neighborhood, we renovate and extend our house, plant a new garden, change our furniture, and the list goes on.

And here is the record of what the teacher changed, how the teacher changed his environment and surrounded himself with beauty. Verse chapter 2, verse 4 to 6, he built more houses, he planted vineyards.

[18:32] Why pay for wine when you can make your own, right? He made gardens and parks, he planted all kinds of fruit trees, he built irrigation systems to water the growth of flourishing trees.

And imagine, you can imagine that it's a massive, well-cultured garden, stretched as far as the eyes could see, a balm for sore eyes and tired minds.

Beautiful place. Now, scholars have pointed out that the words used to describe his garden, Palerol, the words used to describe the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2.

And, yeah, look at the slide. He had Genesis 2 as his blueprint when he embarked on his great project. Great you see that?

This king was attempting to recreate the Garden of Eden, to recreate paradise. He was trying to recapture the non-hebel world that God first created the world to be.

[19 : 52] God-like. Thank you.

In verses 7 to 8, he then bought more male and female slaves to add to those born in his house. He had people waiting on him 24-7.

He added more herds and flocks. He amassed more wealth and treasures. He did not need Spotify or Apple Music. If he liked a band or singer, he simply buys them.

He had a harem to meet his sexual ones. He had everything to delight his heart. And he declared in verse 9, I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

He was accomplished. He was still an observer of life. His wisdom remained with him throughout this path of pleasure. Surely, this will give him ultimate happiness.

[21 : 04] This must be the good life. Verse 11, he takes a step back. and surveys all that his hands have done and what he had toiled to achieve.

Yes, he has done a lot. He has achieved great things. He had many things in his life to give him pleasure and joy. Surely, he has arrived.

Verses 10 to 11, yet, apart from the delight that he felt when he was laboring in the process of building his empire, there was no real satisfaction at the end of it.

Something was missing. Everything was still meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun.

His Eden-like environment remained a Hebel world. pleasure and joy he felt in the journey was gone.

[22 : 12] There was no lingering satisfaction. There was no good return for all his effort in pursuing pleasure. Many of us walk this path of pleasure.

We will pursue pleasure even if we have to work our fingers to the bone for it. we think our hard work will gain us more money, more property, more toys and gadgets, more jewellery, more possessions, more entertainment, at least one maid to serve us and then we will surely be happy. The man who has everything and done all that and more tells us no. no surplus joy apart from that delight while working.

And this is the common testimony of people in this world who have lots and lots and lots of money and things. Like his wine drinking, this pleasure was a vanishing vapour.

A side observation, if this teacher was Solomon, then his achievements brought his downfall. In his pursuit, he had broken the laws governing Israel's king, laid out in Deuteronomy 17.

[23 : 39] And his harem of foreign wives and concubines eventually led him into apostasy. Which path are you on? The path of an endless chase to gain wisdom, achievement, wealth, possession, pleasure.

The teacher has tried them all and found all one thing. Verse 12, his search has been thorough. He has been very thorough. He has considered wisdom and its opposite counterpart of madness and folly. He has done everything necessary to come to his conclusions, so much so that his successor can do no more.

His conclusion, however, is that it was Hebel, meaningless. We hope this is the end of the story, end of the sermon.

No, it's not. It actually gets worse. Wisdom has something else to show him. It showed him his mortality.

[24 : 52] Death awaits him. Here we are back in Genesis 3. Not only has work become painful toil, but also you were returned to the ground since from it you were taken from dust you are and to dust you were returned.

Death, the permanent human reality. Chapter 2, verse 14. The wise walk with eyes in their heads. They clearly see the way they should go. They live wisely and rightly in the ways of the Lord. They say, the word of the Lord is a lamb to my feet.

The fools, they walk in darkness. They make a mess of their lives. Surely the wise have an advantage over the fool in this world. Then it dawns on the wisest person in Jerusalem that the fate

of the fool will overtake him too.

Like the fool, he too must die. What do I gain by being wise? Death is the great equalizer.

[26 : 04] This is just incomprehensible, just not right, meaningless. Hebel. What's more, both the wise and the fool will not be long remembered, both forgotten by future generations.

Ng Kam Hoi was my great-great grandfather. He arrived in Malaya in the late 1800s. My great-grandfather was Ng Yu Kai, born in 1874, died in 1917 in Penang.

I never knew them. No one alive today remembers them. I don't know if they were wise or fools. But I do remember my grandfather, Ng Peng Kwan, who died in 1970.

When my generation passes on, no one will remember him either. What will be left of this man, whether fools or wise, will be as names in my book of genealogy, which I will leave to my children. No one will know what they were like, how they lived their lives, what they accomplished, what they accumulated, what property they had, what contributions to society they made or did not make.

[27 : 30] Even the hope of a lasting legacy is an illusion. No matter how we lived, all must die and all will be forgotten.

then the teacher in his wisdom looked at work in the cold light of death. 2.17 to 18, disillusionment. All the work done in this life is grievous. It is meaningless, like working for nothing, a futile activity, a chasing after the wind.

Why? Well, he could not keep any of it and he had no control over his inheritors. When death comes, he has to leave it to the one who comes after him.

This is enough for him to exclaim in despair, I hated life, I hated all my work. In 2.19 to 21, he tells us that what he has accumulated was a result of all the years of his effort, his skills, his wisdom and knowledge.

[28 : 47] And his labour was not easy. It was anxious striving, it was grievous and painful at times, and he had lost sleep over them.

And finally, he had something to show for it. here was all the fruits of his labour, plenty full. But one day, he must leave it to someone else.

2.21, someone who did not even toil for it. Who knows how his inheritor will manage the estate? Is that person wise or foolish?

Who knows? Wisdom tells him, you are not God, you cannot control the future, and you are not sovereign. His estate is now in someone else's hand, and they have control over all the fruits of his toil.

And this renders his labour meaningless, like working for nothing. His property will soon slip out of his hands, out of his control. Hebel.

[29 : 57] history tells us that 70% of wealthy families lose their wealth by the second generation, and 90% by the third generation.

If the teacher was Solomon, how long did his treasure last? Not even one generation. His son, Rehoboam, succeeded him as king in Jerusalem.

In 1 Kings 14, 25-26, this is recorded. In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak, king of Egypt, attacked Jerusalem.

Five years only, he carried off the treasures of the temple of the Lord and of the royal palace. He took everything. These were the treasures accumulated by Solomon.

Within five years of the reign of his son, gone. We now have the answer to the questions of chapter 1 verse 3 and chapter 2, 22.

[31 : 08] What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun? If our aim is to gain riches and property to leave a legacy, then in the light of death, nothing really.

death renders human toil meaningless. If we look to this world for our happiness, we will be disappointed. Many of us store our treasures on earth as if we will live here forever.

We accumulate things as if we will have them with us forever. We do not want to confront the fact that death will come for us too. the teacher reminded us that life is short and we will leave everything behind.

Are you doing anything today that is of value beyond this life under the sun? Can I ask you again? Are you doing anything today that is of value beyond this life under the sun? Death should inform the way we live.

[32 : 27] Ask anyone here who have had a near-death experience, who have survived a diagnosis of a terminal disease. They will tell you that they look at life very differently now.

Their priorities change. God, family, relationships, their own mental well-being, the small pleasures of daily living all take on great importance.

So, was the teacher then successful in his quest? Has he found out what is good for people to do under the heavens during their short life?

He has. But he scatters his wisdom all over his book. Chapter 2, 24 to 26 is his first glimmer of light. He says, a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This comes from the hand of God.

[33 : 37] Enjoy the gifts of God, the gifts that he has given us. That is his advice. I read that verse again.

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his own toil. This comes from the hand of God. He asks us to have an alternative perspective to life, not one where we toil endlessly for gain, for things we long for, as if we must ensure our own happiness by our own effort. He has shown us that doing life that way does not work. He asks us to live life knowing that we are mortal creatures whose lives are dependent on a good and kind God.

We are to have a proper orientation towards God. Creator, creature. God, human. father, child. Provider, giver, receiver. God is good. He is the one who gives us all that we need.

[34 : 55] Jesus tells us not to be afraid to store our treasures in heaven and that the Father knows what we need on earth and he delights to give them to us.

verses 24 to 25. What does God give? Firstly, he provides food and drink.

He gives the gift of work and he even gives the ability to enjoy them. Verse 26, to the people who please him, he gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.

Come again. he gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. Wait, they were the very things we have seen in the passage above that the world is seeking after, striving for, clamouring to gain more of. Yeah? He gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness. And that is, the world seeking after them is the lot of those who do not know God.

[36 : 04] Verse 26, the sinners, they remain in the vicious cycle of meaningless strife to gather and collect that which they cannot keep.

And the ones who benefit are those who please God and who have given up the striving after gain but who will nonetheless inherit real happiness from the Father's hands.

happiness. We all want happiness. Well, God gives it to those who please him. What does the teacher ask people to do with God's gift?

He asks us to simply enjoy them with thankfulness and gratitude. Enjoy them for what they are, not what they can do for you.

For example, work. Enjoy your work. Find satisfaction in a job well done. Be faithful in what you do. You will remember in chapter 2 verse 10, the teacher took delight in all his labor and that was the reward for all his toil.

[37 : 16] The reward was in the work itself, not what the work can gain for you. Work was a gift to Adam in the garden.

It was only after the fall it became painful toil. But there is still joy in the work itself. It comes from God. Instead of eating food as if all it did for you is just to provide energy so that you can work and clamor for more things, that is to use food for gain, take time to enjoy your food and drink, finding pleasure in them, giving thanks to God for his good provisions.

Living life is not a matter of toiling for gain, but receiving it as a gift from God. Enjoy the provisions God has given with gratitude.

The better life is the one that celebrates the daily joy we find in life, rather than longing for an illusory one at the end of a painful strife.

When we strive for happiness, it eludes us. We simply live life out before God. There is joy in the journey.

[38 : 43] So, enjoy your laksa, your tesi peng. Take pleasure in them. Enjoy every mouth, right? Enjoy its taste.

Find satisfaction in a work well done, in the companion of colleagues, brothers and sisters on the same journey. Give thanks for creation.

Feel the joy of a splendid sunrise and the melancholy of a fiery sunset, or the splendor of a rainbow after the rain. hold the hands of the one you love and delight in the smiles of friends and family. God has given us happiness. Don't miss out on it in the red rays that leads to emptiness. But the teacher ends with this.

What is the last line in this section? Oh no, this too is meaningless. a chasing after the wind. What? What a bummer, but it's true.

[39 : 53] The gift of God for life under the sun are also temporary. The reality of death still hangs over us.

So our final release is not in this life. And we await the return of the true king. who is that one person who actually pleased God.

Jesus Christ, who by his sacrifice made all who believe in him, that is us, also pleasing to God, so that we too will be able to receive God's good gifts for life.

Yeah? Jesus is the ultimate gift of God, and we just sang he is our reward. He is our wisdom and our happiness. And in him, death, which is the last enemy, will one day not be remembered.

And because of him, everything that we do on earth actually matters for all eternity. will come and he will restore Eden, paradise, in a new heaven and new earth.

[41 : 13] And this Eden that he restores will last forever, not Habel, unlike the teacher's poor imitation. In the meantime, at present, while we are still living life under the sun, now, the gift of God, the gifts of God, while they don't make this meaninglessness go away, nonetheless can make this brief life enjoyable.

Yeah? Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your provisions. We thank you for life that you have given to us.

We thank you that we can find joy in life, even though there are many things we do not understand, things which should not be, because we live in a fallen world.

And yet, Lord, we thank you for your gifts, we thank you for your provisions. We receive them with thanksgiving from you. Teach us to enjoy them with gratitude.

Teach us to enjoy each day we have with thankfulness before you. Continue to teach us to walk with you, to receive from you your good gifts, and to stop striving for them.

[42 : 43] Father, we give you glory and honour in Jesus name. And at the end of your handouts, there are coffee questions which you may like to talk about after the service.

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