

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26: Letter 8 - God Gives Joyful Meaning to Labor

Carol Brands

Sometimes we mothers (I speak of myself mainly) weary of the constant task of raising our children. It seems all day long we have to be organizing our tasks and theirs, getting after them to do their tasks, and disciplining them when they fail to do their tasks or else do them grudgingly.

So when we are studying the book of Ecclesiastes and when Solomon describes the wearisomeness of our labor, as he did in our last study, I can well identify. Like him, I wonder what will be the final results of all this labor: will the children grow up to love God? To be honest, hard workers? To be wise?

As Christians, we don't labor apart from God, like those people whom Solomon has so far described. As Christians, we love God and love His Word and desire His blessing. So our whole attitude as we approach our work is far different from the worldly person.

Notice how selfish that man's goals are! He seeks the reward of his work in personal prestige or else in the earthly continuance of his labors. Then, if he fails to gain that prestige or else his work is forgotten, it all becomes of no avail to him.

How different are our goals! We labor because we love God! We labor for the reward of God's love for us! It doesn't matter what people think or what earthly results we see...just as long as we know God approves us!

And then, in Him our work does also have eternal value. Even if we fail to see His purposes now in our lives, it yet will last forever. "Only what's done for Christ will last. For me, to live is Christ."

This long introduction brings us into the short section of Ecclesiastes which we are considering today, the last three verses of chapter 2. Because it is short, we'll simply quote these three verses one at a time and observe their main thoughts.

(verse 24) "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God."

Here Solomon makes a simple statement of fact for the godly person. Given a heart that loves God, then the best way to live is to do everything for the sake of God, enjoying our work. It hurts to admit this, but it is actually sin to dislike our work! I as a mother must raise my children loving my task and teaching my children also to love their tasks!

That isn't natural. The natural thing to do is to become discouraged and to want to escape work. So Solomon adds that this is "from the hand of God." We must pray for God to help us and then seek earnestly to enjoy our work as we do it for Him.

(verse 25) "For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I?"

There are two widely accepted interpretations of this verse and, to my mind, either is acceptable and I don't know which is correct.

The first view sees this text as it appears here and applies the verse to Solomon. He is saying that he can state the truth of verse 24 because he knows from experience that it is true. He personally has sought delight in labor more than any other man and he has found fulfillment

in labor more than any other man. He knows its futility apart from God and also its satisfaction if done in faith.

The other interpretation claims that the last three words are mistranslated and should read “without him,” meaning “without God.” Then the text would read: “Who can eat or who can hasten hereunto without God?”

I also like this idea, perhaps the better of the two! This way the verse refers to everyone and reinforces the idea of verse 24 that we can labour only as God makes it possible.

(verse 26) “For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

What a lot of thought is in this summary verse! There’s the whole contrast between the godly man and the ungodly man. To the godly man God gives not only wisdom and knowledge, but also joy in his work. But to the man who labors apart from godliness, these judgments accompany his work:

#1 Work is not a pleasure, but “travail,” that is, hard and difficult and tiresome labor.

#2 His only “reward” is the short-lived reward of accumulation of things. How useless!

#3 Even this so-called reward will finally be lost as God takes it all from him and gives it to those who are godly. Often we see this already in this life, as, for example, when Laban’s greedy riches were given to Jacob, or as when the treacherous riches of Egypt were given to the Israelites before they left Egypt. But always, always this will be true in eternity: then the ungodly lose all their labor and the righteous are given the honor even of the persecution they endured here on earth.

May God bless you as you faithfully labor for Him by giving you His reward of true wisdom, knowledge and joy.

Questions:

1. Why do verses 24-26 belong with Chapter 3 rather than Chapter 2 in the outline?
2. According to 2:24, what is the best way for the godly man to live? How is this possible?
3. What are the two interpretations of 2:25? (Which interpretation best fits the main theme of Ecclesiastes?)
4. Notice in verse 26 that to a godly man God gives both the ability to labor profitably and also the reward of joy in the labor. By contrast, what does God give to the ungodly man?

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