Catching Smoke: Living Life Under the Sun Part 3

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[0:00] All that does is provide a little time for me to get ready and then get up here. So that's not all it does. What that is is a little introduction video to our series in Ecclesiastes.

If you've been here the last few weeks, then you've seen it before. So if you're not here, if you haven't been here and you want to see it, come back next week and we'll show it again. It'll be great. Listen, we have been in this series for a few weeks in Ecclesiastes.
How many of you guys woke up and read Ecclesiastes this morning? Anybody? I didn't think so. It's not usually the book of the Bible that we turn to the most frequently, but we are in week three now and we're talking about Solomon.
King Solomon is likely the author of Ecclesiastes and calls himself the teacher. And that seems like an audacious thing to call yourself until you realize what King Solomon had.
And that was unlimited wisdom given to him directly from God, unlimited wealth that he had accrued through his wisdom on this earth. And so this guy had reached the pinnacle of life on earth.
[1:12] They call him the richest man ever, King Solomon of Israel. Peak net worth was approximately, this is a very conservative estimate, in today's dollars about $2 trillion, which would easily make him the wealthiest man of all time.

More likely it was probably $4 to $5 trillion. You know, approximately the net worth of the U.S. government, but without the trillion dollars of debt.
So there's that. King Solomon ruled from 970 B.C. to 951 B.C. And during this time he's said to have received about 25 tons of gold for every year of his 39 years of being king of Israel.
25 tons of gold annually. It's not a bad retirement plan. If you say, I know I'm going to get this 25 tons of gold every year, so I think I'll be okay for after I retire.
Solomon's vast wealth. You're probably not going to be able to see much on this slide unless you're sitting like in the first two pews here, but that's okay. King Solomon owned a large palace as well as huge quantities of food, livestock.
[2:24] He also owned 12,000 horses. This is all from 1 Kings. 4,000 stalls for chariot horses. 666 talents of gold received per year.

That's the 25 tons. What does that say? I've got to get over here so I can see it. 540 talents of gold from Ophir and the Queen of Sheba.
These were prominent guests that came to visit him. About another, an additional 20 1⁄2 tons, just on top of everything else. 500 gold shields.
Fleet of trading ships that brought him gold, silver, ivory, apes, baboons, all kinds of exotic animals. Gold goblets. All household articles. Pure gold. Revenues from merchants, traders, governors, Arabian kings.
Precious stones. Large quantities of spices. Spices were incredibly valuable back then. And then down here at the bottom, 1 Kings 10, 27. Solomon was so wealthy that he made silver in Israel as common as stones.
[3:28] Silver was basically worthless in Israel at the time because it was so common to have silver. Silver was so common to have silver in Israel as well. This was unmatched wealth that Solomon had gained through his years of power.

But not just power. A lot of people have had power. But through wisely and accurately executing God's will for his kingdom and his people through the wisdom that came from God.
Last week we talked about how wisdom alone is not enough. You can be right, but it doesn't always fix the problem, does it? You can know what's wrong, but that doesn't always help solve the issue.
Today we're going to talk about the mirage of more. Here's where we find ourselves. If you'll take your Bibles and turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 2. We're going to look at verse 1. We're going to look

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down at verses 10, 11.
We're going to bounce around through this book a little bit and find this idea of the mirage that accumulating or gathering more to yourself actually provides for you.
[4:43] If more could satisfy a human heart, it would have worked for Solomon. Listen to how the Bible describes his life. He built a palace that took 13 years to complete.

He drank wine and hosted endless parties. He owned the fleets of ships we talked about importing exotic goods. He had singers, entertainers, art, gardens, parks, pools, vineyards. His throne was made of ivory and overlaid with gold.
Ivory, like from elephant tusks. It's illegal, I think, now to make things out of ivory, but, you know, back then. Silver became so common it was considered worthless. He had 700 wives, 300 concubines in addition to the wives because somehow 700 wasn't enough.
People traveled from around the world just to hear Solomon speak. If he was alive today, he would be the one lifestyle influencer that we all follow. He would be the one politician and ruler that they would all try to get audience with and try to get in the good graces of.
He would be the man. Travel, food, architecture, beauty, wealth, romance, success. He didn't just have a good life. He had the dream life.
[5:51] And yet, Ecclesiastes is this man telling us that didn't work. It wasn't enough. He didn't say, I feel guilty.

He didn't even say, I did it wrong. What he says is, it didn't satisfy me. This is not a book about failure.
It's a book about success. And how success did not deliver what he thought it would. So look with me, Ecclesiastes chapter 2 and verse 1.
What we're going to see is truth number 1. We fill our lives, but we cannot fill our souls. We fill our lives, but we cannot fill our souls.
How does Solomon say it? I said to myself, come on. Let's try pleasure. Let's look for the good things in life. But I found that this too was meaningless.
[6:57] Would you skip down to verses 10 and 11? Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. Even found great pleasure in hard work.

Lest you get under the impression that Solomon was just a playboy going out there doing whatever he wanted and just making himself feel good all the time. He valued above anyone hard work and earning success.
Getting to the top of the ladder by legitimate means. Solomon did it. He was wise. He made the right calls. He made the right decisions. He did the hard work to build the greatest kingdom on earth.
And it was a reward for all his labors. But he looked across at everything he had worked so hard to accomplish, and he says it was all so meaningless. Like what?
Like chasing the wind. And that's the idea, the concept from where we get the title of this series, catching smoke. Good luck chasing the wind. You're never going to catch it, are you?
[7:58] The wind is always going to outrun you. You got the storm chasers out there, but they can never catch the tornado. They can never stop the hurricane. They can never materially hold it.

And we can't do that with smoke. It's like trying to catch smoke in your hand. That's what the little video beforehand was going to illustrate for you. But listen. It says it's like chasing the wind.
There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. Then, as we read verse 1, we read verses 10 and 11, he lists the things that he tried.
What are these things that he listed? They're pleasure. They're projects to make you feel accomplished. Achieving prosperity. There was peace in Israel.
People weren't coming up against. Man, how many times, how many eras of Israel's history was there peace in the land? Very few. You look back across the history of Israel, it has been a bloody history.
[9:05] They've always been fighting somebody. Somebody's been always coming after them. And God said it would be that way. But God has protected them through every stage.

Solomon's era was largely peaceful. It was unbelievable. They were top dog during Solomon's time. So it was a time of prosperity.
But that didn't fulfill him. He had all the possessions. He had all the prestige. He achieved all of this. And he says, none of it fulfilled my soul.

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He filled his lives. Look at this again. He filled his life with everything that there was to fill. And man, if you were part of Solomon's family, you had it made.
If you were part of his court, you had it made. If you were his friend, if you were in the good graces of the king, your life, it trickled down from Solomon. You were set for life.
[10:05] He helped himself and everyone he cared about. He helped his kingdom. He helped God's people. God used him powerfully to help his people.

And he tells you that it wasn't enough. It didn't fill his soul. Why? Because that alone is never going to be enough.
Because all of those things. Let's look at it again. He listed in verses 10 and 11. The pleasure, the projects, the prosperity, the possessions, the prestige.
All those things. Do you know where you find them? Where do you find all those things? Solomon would tell you, you find them under the sun.
Those are all things you find under the sun that shines down on all of us. You can't fulfill your soul with things found under the sun.
[11:11] What does the end of that video say? I'm testing y'all. See if you pay attention during those videos. We've shown them the last couple weeks. How do we live this life under the sun? What do we do?

A little louder? We look above the sun. Thank you, Brian Hall. We look above the sun. That's where he's trying to get us to.
That's where he's trying to. This is going to be the, man, cheat sheet. We're sneaking ahead to the final sermon in this series, all right? He reaches the final conclusion of all of this that he's teaching us as the teacher.
And he says, you're never going to find fulfillment under the sun. He says, this is the final conclusion. We're going to get there in chapter 12 at the end. So, the most devastating word in the whole passage that he lists is that these things were insufficient.
They filled his life, but they did not fulfill his soul. A few chapters ahead in Ecclesiastes 5, it says, those who love money will never have enough.
[12:16] How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness. Boy, what a testimony from a guy who is wealthier than anyone will ever be. You can't accumulate that kind of wealth in today's world.

You can't. Jeff Bezos can't do it. Bill Gates can't do it. Nobody can do it. How meaningless to think that wealth or getting more will ever make you happy.
What happens when you chase something and then you get it? You find something else to chase. Because otherwise, you would feel empty. Well, I've spent the last 10 years going for this and now I have it.
What am I going to spend my life chasing now? Now, you've always got to find something else to pursue. And that's what Solomon found. In Luke chapter 12, Jesus teaches us the same concept. He says, watch out.
Man, if Jesus tells you to watch out, you better watch out. You better pay attention to whoever comes next. Jesus often didn't speak this way. And so he says, watch out. Guard against every kind of greed.
[13:20] Life is not measured by how much you own. Look, you can go to India. I've been to India on missions trips many times. I've been to Russia, the former Soviet Union, Ukraine.

I've been to poor countries. Third world economies. Places where people are struggling. And they have nowhere to turn to get out of their economic situation.
In America, it's often different. Often, there are opportunities. There's hope. I'm not saying people don't struggle here.
I'm not saying everybody has a chance to turn their situation around. But America birthed the middle class. And the problem is, in America, most of us who would be considered middle class, whether you're lower or in the true middle or you're upper middle class or whatever, or maybe you're below the economy line or maybe you're above that line, regardless, most of us try to own more or better.
And Jesus literally says, watch out for that. That is a kind of greed. It's not just, I want my bank account to have more dollars than the next guy.

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[14:40] It's the greed of saying, I need more, I need better constantly. I got a great TV. Now I want a better one. I got a great job.

Now I need a better one. I got a great truck. I got a great boat. I had a great vacation. Now we need better. Constantly, we need to upgrade.
And that's what society ingrains into us from an early age. You got to upgrade. You got to get more. You got to get better. Listen, there is nothing inherently wrong with those things.
But Jesus says, watch out. Because that can so quickly turn to greed. And it will never help you. It will never fulfill you. It will take over your life and you'll get to the end, whether you achieved it or you didn't.
And you'll say, man, I'm still unsatisfied. Because life cannot be measured by how much you own.
And then in Proverbs, this is interesting because Solomon wrote the majority of the Proverbs as well.
[15:39] And he says, just as death and destruction are never satisfied, so human desire is never satisfied. Has there ever been a time on this earth where there wasn't death?

Death is the one thing we haven't figured out, right? It's the one thing we can't avoid. We have no answer for death. Only God holds the keys to life and death. Destruction will always happen on this earth.
It's unavoidable. Why? Why is destruction so unavoidable on this earth? Does anybody have a theory on that? What's that?
Sin. A few of y'all had it. Sin is the reason that destruction will always happen on this earth. Destruction of economies. Destruction of nations.
Destruction of people groups. Destruction of human rights. Destruction of freedom. Destruction of happiness. Destruction of joy. All throughout human history, there are tales of destruction.
[16:36] And Solomon saw this, and he teaches, says, death and destruction are never satisfied. And just like that, your desires will never be satisfied. Under the sun, you can't satisfy your heart.

You have to look above the sun. The problem with more is that it's not always evil. The problem with more is that it trains your heart to need more.
Even more. More money. More pressure. More success. More anxiety. More stuff. More maintenance.
More options. More regret. Or dissatisfaction. You can fill your calendar. You can fill your garage. You can fill your savings account, your resume, your weekends, your phone, your life.
And you still feel empty. Why is this? It's because success is a disappointing savior. Can we say this together? Ready?
[17:42] Success is a disappointing savior. That's so true. There's only one who can really save you. And look, in a Baptist church, when you say the word save, usually we're thinking, I give my heart to Jesus.

He saves me from sin. He saves me from hell. He guarantees me a spot in heaven and he washes my sins away and I'm good now. That is one type of salvation that God offers to you because of what Jesus did on the cross.
But that is not the limit of his salvation. He can save you from so much. He can save you from yourself. And he can save you from the powers of this darkness that surrounds us and we wake up to it every day.
But success can't save you from any of that. It's a disappointing savior. It is a tool of the darkness.
Now look, God can turn it around. And Joshua 1.8 teaches us that if you meditate on God's word, if you follow him, if you give your heart to him, that he says, I will give you good success.
It's a different kind of success. It's a success that comes from above the sun. Your life might not always look successful under the sun, but it's being judged by the wrong measuring stick.
[18:53] Earthly success is a disappointing savior. Number two, truth two, we strive to achieve joy instead of receiving it.

You cannot achieve joy. You can't work hard enough or set up just the right system.
It can't be diagnosed. There's no diagram that equals or equation that equals joy. You have to receive joy. You can find moments of happiness.
You can be glad at certain times. You can feel positively. You can laugh. You can joke. You can be in a good mood.

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Those things change. Joy is a gift from God. You can only receive it from him. Solomon's mistake wasn't just what he pursued.
[19:50] It was how he pursued it. He tried to manufacture joy. He tried to produce joy. He tried to achieve it. But it's not something that you can conquer.

It's something you receive from God. In the next chapter over, or just a few verses down actually, before we get to chapter three, in verse 24 of chapter two, he says, I decided that there's nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work.
Look at that again. He said, I decided there's nothing better than food and drink and being satisfied with what you work at. Can anybody else identify with that? Like that's the simple life. That's the good life, right?
Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God. The reason that I find joy in these things is because God gives it to me.
Because I'm following his design for my life. But when I'm trying to manufacture the joy, when I'm trying to get better and use those things that are actually just gifts from God and say, all right, I'm going to take what God gave me and I'm going to leverage it and I'm going to get better at it and I'm going to get to the top of the ladder at it and I'm just going to be the best at enjoying what God gave me.
[21:12] Man, you've ruined it. You totally missed the point. And I think that's what Solomon's telling us. I got to the top of the heap. I took these things which are good gifts from God and I turned them on their head and I got to the top of the ladder in the human eyes in all those areas.

Food, drink, success, work, all that. And it ruined it. Next chapter. Chapter 3. Would you turn over one page? Chapter 3, verse 12 and 13.
So I concluded. Here's a conclusion that we've been looking for. All the way, chapters 1, 2, and now into 3, we've been waiting for Solomon. What is the conclusion here? You're telling us a lot of dreary stuff.
You're getting us down here, man. What are you getting to? I concluded that there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. People should eat and drink.
When y'all get out of church, we got to listen to Solomon. People should eat and drink, okay? Go get a nice Diet Coke and a good lunch and you'll be good. People should eat and drink and they should enjoy the fruits of their labor for these gifts are from God.
[22:23] Solomon got to the end of his life and he realized these were not things that I achieved on my own. Even though God gave me wisdom, even though it looks like I set all this in motion, God gave me the things which truly brought me joy.

He gave them to me. They were gifts from him. James 1, 17 puts it this way. Whatever is good, whatever is perfect, that is a gift coming down to us from God our Father.
So, what does this mean? You can't pat yourself on the back too hard. You can't let your head swell up too full.
You can't look back and say, man, look at everything I did. Look at everything I accomplished. Guys tell our wives, look at everything I've provided for you, babe. You can't look back and say, I did this. By the same token, you can't look back at maybe the things you lack and say, what's wrong with me? Why haven't I gotten as much as the next guy has?
[23:36] Why am I not as happy and fulfilled as seemingly she is? Every good and perfect thing is a gift that comes from God and he gives us what we need for each moment.

And then we can use his wisdom to gain what else he wants us to have. We can make silly, ignorant decisions with our money and suffer the consequences on this earth.
We can misuse what God has given to us. Last summer, we talked through the parables of Jesus. We talked about the parable of the talents and the master gave his servants a different amount. He said, go out and invest what I've given you and then multiply it and then I'll reward you.
And two of them did and one of them didn't. There is a principle of using wisely what God gave you. But you have to look at the one who gave it to you and recognize it came from him and not put your joy attached to what he gave you.
It's the giver, not the gift. So I want to draw your attention to this book. Ruth Chew Simons wrote this book called When Striving Cease.
[24:50] And I pulled this quote from it. It says, if we believe that Jesus is all we need, let's just run a little focus group study in here today, okay? However many people we have in the room, how

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many of you would say, Jesus is all I need?

Can you slip your hand up real quick? You don't raise your hand. I'm gonna assume you think that Jesus is not all that you need, okay? You need something, all right? If we believe that Jesus is all we need, then why do we live worn out, fearful, and full of anxious striving.
That word striving is kind of what she focuses on in the book. When strivings cease. It's a line from an old hymn that says, my comforter, my all in all, when strivings cease, he's the one who gives us strength.
So listen. Here it is. When fears are stilled, when strivings cease, my comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand.
The writer of this hymn realized that standing in the love of Christ is not being lazy. Standing in the love of Christ doesn't mean you're not doing anything.
[26:14] Doesn't mean you're not being productive. But you've stopped striving. You've stopped joining the rat race with everybody else to try to get ahead, try to get the next thing.

You've stopped chasing smoke. And you've started resting. You've started trusting. You've started surrendering.
Joy does not grow in the soil of striving. joy grows in the soil of gratefulness.
And that's the second thought I want to leave you with. Gratitude grows when strivings cease. Have you ever noticed that there is a connection between joy and being thankful?
There's a connection in your heart and in mine. When I'm thankful, when I'm content, when I'm grateful, I experience the joy of the Lord.
[27:23] When I'm critical, when I'm discontent, when I'm prideful, when I think I need more, I don't feel joyful.

I feel like things are wrong. Things are not as they should be. And I bet you, you feel the same way. Because gratitude grows when you stop chasing smoke.
When the strivings cease, that's when gratitude grows and that's when joy comes. That's when fulfillment comes. It's when sufficiency comes.
So here's where this connects to our theme for our church for the new year. Our direction. It's not a year of perfection. It's a year of, let's say it together, direction. Let's try it again. Come on y'all, you gotta be with me.
Here we go. Not a year of perfection. It's a year of direction. Yes it is. So which direction are we going? We have to understand these truths. This will determine the direction that we go as individuals, as families, as a church.
[28:24] Truths that determine our direction. Comfort does not equal blessing. Comfort can be a blessing from God. But just because you're comfortable or someone else is comfortable, it doesn't mean that in and of itself was a blessing from God.

That might have been a product of you ignoring God and you made a comfortable, whoa. Sorry, people up there, don't kill me. I better go get it because I got one more to turn to.
All right, here we go. Thing just flew out of my hand. Comfort does not guarantee blessing from God. Secondly, easy doesn't mean faithful. Just because something is easy doesn't mean that is the faithful way to walk.
Just because you've been attending church for a long time or calling yourself a Christian or you think that you've been following God for a long time but you've been doing it on your terms, not his, what he laid out for us in his teachings, that's more easy.
That doesn't mean you've been faithful. And then finally, more does not mean better. Just because we have more of something doesn't mean that's better.
[29:36] You look at some of the largest gatherings in churches around the world, some of them seem like they're really following Jesus. Some of them, it's hard to find Jesus anywhere in those thousands and thousands of people.

More does not always mean better. So, how do we live under the sun? Solomon tried everything under the sun and it failed him.
So he lifts his eyes and we must lift our eyes above the sun. Let me ask you the question that we've been learning together to answer every week. You ready, church?
We're not gonna do it twice. We got this. First try, all right? Here we go. One, two, three. How do we live under the sun? We look above the sun. That's right. Let's pray together. God, this is what we commit to do as a church.

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We commit to look above the sun. We live in the domain of darkness but you are establishing your kingdom and you're using us to do it.
[30:35] So we can't look down here to find fulfillment. We can't look down here to find joy. You can use us under the sun. You can use people or things or circumstances in our lives but it's got to come from you.

The gift has to come from you. Help us every morning to not let the things under the sun steal our joy. Help us every morning to not let the things under the sun steal the direction you've given to us. We've seen evidence of in this church. Gunner was talking about it. We've seen evidence over and over again of you providing fruit that means something. Blessings that mean something.
Life change happening in our hearts, the people in this room. Over 40 people in the last two and a half years have stepped forward in front of the church and said I've chosen to follow Jesus.
I want to follow his example in baptism. We've seen people grow. We've seen families come together. We've seen beautiful evidences of things that really fulfill.
[31:57] That stuff, that comes from above the sun. Keep our eyes there. Oh God, we'll give you the glory for it. With our heads bowed, our eyes closed, if there's a decision that the Holy Spirit is asking you to make right now, I pray that either in your seat you would make that decision for God, whatever he's prompting you to do, or if you need to slip down front, if you need to talk to me or Jared or youth director or whoever, if you need to come down and kneel at these steps and just have a quiet moment with God up here, that's all open to you right now.

You need to make today the day of salvation and turn from sin and turn to Jesus. Say I want to put my faith in you for the first time today. I receive your forgiveness of my sins.
I believe you died on the cross. I believe you rose from the dead. And I believe you're willing and able to forgive me and make me your child. Can you please come down and talk to me?
I'd love to walk through that with you. If you'd like to place your membership in this church as some did today by baptism, if you'd like to transfer your membership here from another church, come down, let's have that conversation.
Whatever God's working on you about right now, say yes to him. Thank you.

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