

Well, greetings to you all. It really is a gift and an honor to be with you. I'm so thankful for this opportunity, so grateful for Cairn and so many of your students that I do know, and thankful to have this chance to consider God's Word with you.

As I was thinking about this season of life that you find yourself in and remembering what it was like when I was in that season of life, you have all of life ahead of you and all these endless possibilities and boundless opportunities. As I thought of that, I thought of this passage from Ecclesiastes 2, In light of all the things you might give yourself to and in light of all the things that you might pursue, even as you go from this place into the rest of your life.

As I thought of that, I was reminded of an article, some time back, by a man named Aaron Rodgers. If you know that name, he's a future Hall of Fame quarterback. He's accomplished as much as you can in that field. He's won a Super Bowl, and there was an article written about his experience shortly after winning the Super Bowl. He had played out of his mind the game of his life. And he remembers the confetti falling down on his head, a stadium full of people chanting his name. He had won the highest award there was, holding the Lombardi Trophy. And at the end of that magical night, this night that he had dreamed of all his life, thought about since he was a kid, since he first held a football in his hand, at the end of that whole night, he felt something, quote, unexpected. He describes what that moment was like, and this is what he said, "like a space had opened up inside him," and a jarring realization sprang into his mind where he said to himself, "Man, I hope I don't just do this." Describes, Rogers does that he realized he was still looking for something, for a sense of clarity or purpose, something that was beyond his current line of sight. Can you imagine that? Being at the very peak of what you hoped to climb, having accomplished all there is to accomplish, having gotten everything you've ever wanted to get, having a stadium full of people cheering your name. I mean, the whole world affirming that you matter, you're significant, you've arrived, literally awarding you the most valuable person.

I mean, something to affirm that you are finally there, and yet in that moment, feeling empty inside, like a space had opened up, an abyss that you couldn't figure what was going on. When you've gotten everything there is to get and find that it's still not enough, then what do you do?

Now, it wasn't just Rogers. Tom Brady had a very similar interview. It wasn't after his first, but after his third Super Bowl win. And after three Super Bowl wins, here's what Tom Brady said. Tom Brady said, "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still feel like there's something greater out there for me? Maybe a lot of people would say to me, Hey, man, this is what it is. I've reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think, God, it's got to be more than this." And he was asked then, What is that this? What is that thing? And he responded, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."

But it's not just Aaron Rodgers or Tom Brady. It's not just football players. There's a movie actor named Jim Carrey. I don't know if in your day, you'll know him as Sonic the Hedgehog. In my day, he was known for profound films like *Dumb & Dumber* and *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*. Well, that actor had the most profound thing to say. He said this. He said, "I think everyone should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see that it's not the answer." I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see that it's not the answer.

Now, my friends, I don't know what it would be for you. I don't know what your mountaintop is. I don't know what your peak or pinnacle is. I don't know what it is that you're striving for, that you long for. Perhaps it's some academic achievement. Perhaps it's the job you're going to land outside and after this place. Perhaps it's the money that you're going to make or the home that you're going to buy or the relationship that you're going to have or the marriage that you'll build. But I do know that we've all got something. We've all got something that feels like if I could just have blank, and you can fill in your own blank.

But if I could just have blank, then I would finally be content. Then I would finally have arrived. Then I would finally feel like nothing else is bubbling up in my soul. I would have everything I could have if I could just have blank. Or the inverse of that. If I don't have blank, then I don't even know why I would live. If I don't have blank, I don't know why I'd wake up in the morning. You see, whatever it is, and I

know we've all got a theology up here, functionally in our heart, there's something that we fill that blank in with. We go, This is what my life is about. These are my pursuits, and this is what would make me finally feel like I've arrived. And maybe you hear Aaron Rodgers or Tom Brady or Jim Carrey, and you would go, I don't know what's wrong with them, but I can tell you this much. If I had what they have, you would not hear me talking like that. I imagine you'd go, If I got to what they got, then you wouldn't hear me talk about no space inside or emptiness or dissatisfaction. I would be totally content if I could just have blank. You see, because We're all tempted to think we're the exception. They're the rule, we're the exception. And somehow we are those that, while the rest of the world drinks saltwater and remains thirsty, will guzzle an ocean and somehow be satisfied. We want to believe we'd be the exception. And that's where Solomon, from the Book of Ecclesiastes, would raise his hand and say to us, No, you wouldn't. Be the exception, that is. Because Solomon would say, I tried. I tried to be the exception, and I'm telling you, it didn't work.

If you read the Bible about Solomon, if he were in our day and you went on to LinkedIn, you would find that there would be no degree that Solomon hadn't had, no achievement he hadn't accomplished, no ladder he hadn't climbed, no mountain he hadn't scaled. If you follow Solomon on Instagram, you would find there'd be no destination he hadn't visited, no restaurant he hadn't eaten at, no concert where he didn't have a front row seat, no pleasure that he had ever denied himself. Solomon did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, with all the resources that no one of us will ever have.

He did it all and he had a ball. And at the end of it all, he concludes, It's all hevel. That's the word he uses. It's the word that means it's all smoke. It's like catching smoke. It's like chasing the wind. It's like grabbing hold of air. It's hevel. It's vanity. It's vanity. It's all vanity. It's meaningless, meaningless. Life under this sun, if this life is all there is, and what these five senses can see, touch, taste, smell, if that's all there is, then I'm telling you it's meaningless, meaningless. It's all meaningless. Ecclesiastes is a very intimidating book, but it does take an honest look at saying, If this life under the sun is all there is, if what's to be enjoyed and experienced by your five senses is all there is, then I'm telling you, vanity, vanity. It's all vanity. In order to show you that, Solomon in chapter 2 invites you on a journey to experiment pleasure with him, to say, Come, as I sip and from everything there is in life under the sun and see if you come to a different conclusion than I did. That's what he'll do. With all the vigor that he has and all the resources will never have, Solomon pursues pleasure.

He starts with what you might call the pleasure of alcohol and parties. That's what I'll call it. The pleasure of alcohol and parties, low-hanging fruit, easy for anyone. This is what he says, 2: 3. "I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine. My heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life." Here's his experiment. He's going to test himself with pleasure. That's verse one. And now he's going to go to his first avenue. He's going to go to wine. He's figuring, Look, we've got a few brief days of life here. How do we make the most of our few laps around the sun while we live life under the sun? And so he gives himself to alcohol. And so what he's asking, because he's wise enough to ask it, is, Will this do? Can the buzz give me the dopamine that I'm looking for? Or, Can it numb the pain of life under the sun long enough to give me what I'm looking for?

And so he turns to alcohol. Commentators go back and forth on how exactly he engaged it. You see, in the verse, he says, I laid hand of it like keeping my wisdom with me and like folly. So it's almost like, did he do it drinking with wisdom or did he drink a fool? And the answer is we don't really know. In fact, commentators go back and forth, and some will say it's almost like you could picture sophisticated Solomon. Sophisticated Solomon sits by a fire and he listens to classical music, and he eats caviar, and he collects fine art, and he's got a glass of the finest wine. And others would say, No, it's not sophisticated Solomon. It's spring break Solomon. And spring break Solomon has cheap shots of tequila and doesn't remember what happened last night and has a strange tattoo Whatever it is, the point is, Solomon's given himself over to this, either with wisdom or like a fool. But at the end of the day, Solomon concludes, The buzz eventually wears off. The numbness gives way. The problems return. And what he was looking for, vanity of vanities. In fact, not just alcohol.

When Solomon would throw a party, there's another passage in first Kings 4. I'll just read a few. Listen

to what it like for one day when Solomon threw a shindig. It says, Solomon's provision for one day was 30 cores of fine flour and 60 cores of meal, 10 fattened oxen, 20 pasture-fed cattle Which, by the way, I love that he liked pasture-raised organic stuff before it was a thing. Pasture-fed cattle, 100 sheep besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl. Scholars say if you put together Solomon's spread, it would have fed something like 15 to 20,000 people. So you know that really awesome party you went to? Solomon said that was so cute. Because when Solomon throws a party, 20,000 of his closest friends show up, and there is offered nothing but the finest of foods and wines and all there is. But at the end of it all, Solomon says what braided said, God, I hope there's more to life than this. So maybe it's not the pleasure of alcohol. He continues his experiment, and he says, Maybe it's the pleasure of having the perfect place. When you graduate from here, you've got some goals.

Maybe it's the perfect place. This is verse 4, I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. So Solomon figures, look, you got to leave the juvenile life behind. It's not found in parties and alcohol. It's found in growing up and settling down. It's what can make life satisfying. At the end of this, it's having that perfect house. You wouldn't say it because it's too crude to say, but in that right neighborhood with the perfect lawn, with the good school district, that's what you want. You get the grades so that you can land the job, so that you can buy the house, so that you can live in the neighborhood and send the kids to the right school and have the perfect American dream. Solomon is only saying to us, he lived the American dream before there was an America. Here's what he says. Did you notice in verse 4 and 5 that for Solomon, everything is in the plural? It's not he built a house.

It's I built houses. It's not I planted a vineyard. It's I planted vineyards and gardens and parks and trees and pools. Meaning Solomon didn't have a home, a home. He had a beach house on the Mediterranean and a villa in Nazareth and a downtown loft apartment in Bethlehem, not to mention his palace in Jerusalem. If you want a sense of Solomon's opulence, it took seven years to build the temple of God in Jerusalem. It took twice as long to build his house. I mean, that's the opulence of Solomon. If you want to catch just a glimpse of his perfect place, there's a description in first Kings 10. I'll just read a few. It says, "The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. So the ivory throne wasn't enough. He then covered it with the finest gold. The like of it was never made in any kingdom. All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver. Silver was not counted as anything in the days of Solomon. For the king had a fleet of ship of Tarsish, and once every three years, the fleet of ships would bring gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks."

Solomon had a private zoo floating to him every three years. "And he had a home where there was an ivory throne, and then it was laid in gold. And then on top of that, if that wasn't enough, silver was not as anything in the days of Solomon." Here's my point. When you graduate and you land that perfect job and you buy the perfect home and you make it look like something straight out of HGTV, Solomon would look at you and go, That is so cute. A for effort. Solomon had wealth like you've never had, but what's the conclusion of his experiment? Can I tell you? Because I'm older than you. And so since I'm older than you, I want you to know my peers have done it all. My peers have lived out the American dream. I I have graduated with and my peers, my middle-aged friends, they own it all, they've achieved it all, they've accomplished it all, they've gotten to the top of the mountain. They have lived the American dream. And you ask any one of my peers, you ask middle-aged Americans, have all the cravings gone? Is that blank filled in such a way that nothing bubbles up in your soul anymore?

You're perfectly content? Or do you find yourself still going, God, there's got to be more than this. Can I tell you one of the most memorable conversations I had was I remember talking to someone who had a perfect job, who lived in the perfect house, had a perfect marriage with the perfect kids in the perfect school district. And I remember this person telling me, God, please let there be more than picking out the color of the new curtains and how to paint the front door. And I remember them saying to me, I am so bored. Because I'm telling you, what do you do when you've gotten everything there is to get and you find it's not enough? So it's not the pleasure of alcohol and parties. It's not the pleasure of having the perfect place. Maybe it's the pleasure of having wealth and possessions because it's not just enough to have the place. You need the stuff that goes with it. So here's Solomon, 7: B, the

second half. He says, "I also had great possessions of herds and flocks more than any Anyone who ever before me in Jerusalem. I also gather for myself silver and gold and the treasure of Kings and provinces."

Solomon had more money than you could count. You heard it before. Silver was not anything in the days of Solomon. There's nothing Solomon ever wants that he doesn't buy, nothing ever desires that he doesn't get. Solomon has pre-ordered, I don't even know what number we're up to, the iPhone 18. He already has it. Except, Solomon is wise enough to know that the thrill he feels as he unwraps his new shiny toy is a thrill he felt once before, and that this thing, soon enough, will end up in the same place that the 17, the 14, the 10, and the two ended up, and that eventually, he's going to have to trade this in for another gadget and another gizmo, another toy, and another trinket because Solomon's wise enough to know he's running on a treadmill, running and running and going nowhere. He has drunk all there is, and at the end there is, he's gotten all there is to get, and at the end, he says, like an actor would say, I hope everyone gets rich and famous so that they can see that it's not the answer. So it's maybe not pleasure and parties, maybe it's not the perfect place or the wealth and the possessions.

Solomon then continues his experiment and says, Maybe it's sex, maybe the most powerful of all the pleasures. Eight, and the third part, he says, I got, after he lists the entertainers and the singers, he says, "I got many concubines, the delight of the sons of men." What could be more powerful, what could be more pleasurable than the pleasure of sex. And so King Solomon, if you read the Bible, is notorious for his sexual appetite. 700 wives, some 300 concubines. Solomon could have a different lover every night of the week. And at the end of it, what would Solomon's conclusion be? It would be the same conclusion that some of us would know all too well. You talk to someone who struggles with porn, and they would tell you what was once exciting, no longer satisfies, and you find yourself going to darker places and crossing lines you never thought you'd cross. I remember talking to someone who captured it, I think, perfectly well. He said to me, I have seen things that when I am sane makes me want to throw up And then, like a dog returning to vomit, I go right back to it again.

You see, we know, perhaps painfully well, that that, as powerful as it is, can't fill the abyss that's here. Listen to this quote. It says, When sex is pursued only for pleasure or only for gain, or even only to fill a void in the soul, it becomes elusive, impersonal, and ultimately disappointing. When sex is pursued to fill this abyss, it becomes elusive and ultimately disappointing. If you were to ask me what preacher said that, or what Christian book said that, or what Bible verse said that, I would tell you, *Time* magazine said that. *Time* magazine had enough insight to go, this is the human reality. In fact, if they had language, they would borrow Solomon's word to say, Sex, when pursued like that, is hevel. It's smoke. It's chasing a wind. It's grabbing the air. It's vanity. It's vanity. It's all vanity. For the sake of time, I won't keep going, but you could talk about the pleasure of being famous and admired. Solomon in verse 9, we'll talk about how he's greater than everyone. People would travel from distances to be in his presence, and queens would be breathless at the sight of Solomon.

In case you're thinking of a category that Solomon hasn't named, Just to cover it all, in verse 10, he says this, "Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil." Meaning, just in case you're thinking of a category he hasn't named, he's saying, I gave myself to all of it. Anything I wanted, I never said no to my heart. Any pleasure I pursued, I never denied myself. I went after it all, and I had a ball. And what's the conclusion after this whole experiment? Verse 11, "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was hevel, all was vanity, a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."

After I did all of this, I'm telling you, meaningless, meaningless. It's all meaningless. Vanity, vanity, it's all vanity. And the little part of our heart that doesn't believe it, I'm telling you, Tom Brady, or Aaron Rogers, or Jim Carrey, or King Solomon would say to you, Vanity, vanity, it's all vanity.

Now, God is giving us the Book of Ecclesiastes for the sake of wisdom. And the wisdom is not God is this cosmic killjoy who hates pleasure. No, all of the things we just were his invention. It's just that God knows that these things under the sun can't fill the abyss. If I don't use my hand to bang in nails,

it's not because I'm anti-hand. It's just because I know that a hand can't do what a hammer can. If I try to use a hand to do what a hammer should do, I will find that I mangle and destroy my hand. God is not anti the things of life under the sun. God simply knows that if you find the things of life under the sun and seek to fill the abyss, you will mangle and destroy the thing because none of them as powerful as they are, are big enough to fill that abyss. Sex is great, but it's just not big enough to fill the empty space. And alcohol or pleasure or homes or accomplishments or achievements or whatever you'll do as you graduate from this place, as awesome as they all are, none of them will fill the abyss.

In fact, when Aaron Rogers talks about that space, I think he's onto something because hundreds of years before him, a man named Blaise Pascal wrote. And Pascal said this. He said, "You'll find in every human heart an empty trace which man tries to fill with all the things in his surroundings, seeking from these things. But" listen to this, "they are all inadequate because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object." That is to say, only by God himself.

The wisdom of Solomon, the Book of Ecclesiastes is to say, If all that we have is the stuff under the sun, it's vanity, vanity. But the message of Ecclesiastes is, There is one beyond the sun, and you were made for the one beyond the sun. The one beyond the sun is infinite enough to fill that infinite abyss and can satisfy what no one else can satisfy. He's the one who sat by the woman at the well and said, I am the water that you're looking for. If you drink from me, you'll never thirst again. It's not an ocean of saltwater. It's the living water who is Jesus Christ.

And he can satisfy and bring purpose and meaning in a way that nothing else can. Because if you have everything but don't have him, I'm telling you, it's Hevel. Last thing, and I'll be done. What convinced me of this more than anything else was I watched this show called *The Good Place*. I don't know if you've ever seen *The Good Place*. I saw some of the seasons, but I watched the end of the show. If you don't know the show, it's been out for years. This is your fault. Not mine. So I'm going to blurt out the show to you. But *The Good Place* is, NBC's show of the Afterlife. It's NBC's vision of what the Afterlife is like. And as you can imagine, if there is an afterlife, everybody wants to get to the Good Place. So there's these characters that are aiming to get to the good place. And after six or seven seasons, they finally get to the good place. Nbc's vision of heaven. And my friends, the good place has everything. You want a milkshake, you get a milkshake. You want to travel there, you travel there. You want to play Madden in an NFL-sized stadium, you get to play Madden in an NFL-sized stadium.

There's nowhere you want to go, you can't go. Nothing you want to do, you can't do. Nothing you want to try, you can't try. You can have it all and have a ball. Nbc's Good Place has everything in heaven except for one thing. It's a heaven without God. Nbc's vision of the Good Place is a heaven without God. Can I tell you how the show ends? After they've drank every milkshake there is to drink and gone to every place there is to go, and tried everything there is to try, and tasted everything there is to taste. After they've had it all, they are so bored they want to stop existing. In fact, the problem of NBC's Good Place ends with them wanting to put a bullet in their soul, and they want to walk through a door and cease to exist. Because though they don't know it, NBC's Good Place is telling you, A good place without God is hell. By definition, having everything without him and having it forever is hell. That's what hell is. It's to have it all and have a ball without him. You get it and you get it forever.

And so the promise of the gospel is you get him. You get the one being who can satisfy the abyss. And so as you go from here in all the things you pursue, in all the things you accomplish and do, do them knowing that the one beyond the sun is the one that can fill that space. And then it'll provide meaning, meaning, wonderful meaning to everything in life under the sun. Let me pray that for you.

Father, we give you thanks for this time, and I thank you so much for these dear friends. I pray your blessing on them as they study here, as they go from here. For those who empower them here, we pray, Lord, that you would even today give us renewed affection for Jesus Christ. Let the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. This we ask and pray in Jesus' name. Amen.