
All right, how's everybody doing? Good. Good to see all of you. I want to greet those of you here at our Northwest campus, and would you please put your hands together and let's greet our other campuses as well right now. I just want to say hello to North, Downtown, and West, anybody that may be tuning in online. It's so, so good to have you.

On April 4, 1968, an assassin's bullet took the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. On November 2, 1983, there was a bill that was signed that made his birthday, January 15, which will be tomorrow, a federal holiday, and it's an important time for us to remember that things are not right in this world as we now know it. There are lots of things that are broken, and there are things that need to be mended. Our society knows this, and everybody's searching for solutions. We know that the only effective and lasting solution is who Jesus is and what he came to bring.

Jesus would come to give his life for all people so that we might be reconciled to God and to one another, and it's that 'one another' part that can be so difficult and easy to forget.

About 10 years ago, I stood on this stage and preached the very first message that I would ever preach at this church. I have no idea what that sermon was about; I cannot remember. It was that good.

I do remember that one of the things that I said that just kind of came out of the study of whatever passage that we happened to be in that particular weekend was that I believe that God's vision for the big-C Church, as well as for our church, is that we would look not so much like an egg carton but a salad bowl.

An egg carton, like you open it up and everything's the same color. They're not touching. Everything's kind of uniform and in line. But a salad bowl is way more interesting. There are all kinds of colors and shapes and sizes all mixed in there together, and that's what diversity should look like.

Our desire to grow in diversity as a church is not because of political correctness or social pressure, but because of the very Gospel message itself, and it's us placing this question in front of us: How could we be reconciled to God yet refuse to be reconciled to one another?

One of the things I love about the gospel message is that it crosses all kinds of cultures and ethnicities. I've gathered with believers in Russia and Poland and Brazil and Mexico and South Africa and Kenya, and those cultures looked very, very different, the worship services looked different, but it was the same Jesus and it was the same Gospel, and it was beautiful.

Our desire to grow in diversity as a church is because we know that heaven is going to be diverse and we need the practice.

Over the last 10 years or so, we've grown in this, but we still have a long way to go. It's kind of felt like three steps forward and two-and-a-half steps back at times. We've made a lot of mistakes and blunders, and yet those mistakes have been met with grace and a teachable spirit by most of us. We still have a long way to go.

So I want you to know that tomorrow all of our staff across all of our campuses, some 90+ of us, are going to be gathering together at the Downtown campus, and we're going to watch a film documentary on our very own Crispus Attucks High School. It's a high school located downtown.

If you don't know the history of it, Crispus Attucks was built originally, it was the only school that African-American students could attend before the days of integration. There are some memorable alumni who have come through that school. We're going to have three of them with us tomorrow, and we're going to have kind of a panel discussion after the film is over. So I just want you to know that. I want you to be praying for that, and I want to encourage you to be intentional as well.

I also just want to thank everyone across all of our campuses from various different ethnicities and cultures. I want to thank you for making this place home and not just writing us off as a church, but really leaning in. I want you to know my heart and the heart of all of us here is that our desire to grow in diversity is borne out of the unity that we have in Jesus, so we want to continue to lean into this.

Let me pray for us. Father, we come to you right now, and I thank you for your son Jesus, who gave his life for all people so that we can be reconciled to you, but also that we might be reconciled to one another. There are all kinds of things that can divide us, but we know that the one thing that unites us is more powerful than them all. We thank you for Jesus.

We pray that our church would look more like the nations because we know that in heaven it's going to be a very, very diverse place, so we want that to be reflected here. We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, if you have a Bible or a Bible app, would you please meet me in Ecclesiastes Chapter 3? That's where we're going to start today.

My son, several years ago, was really into this game called Minecraft. I don't know if any of you have heard of it. If you have a middle-school child or you did have a middle-school child in your home, you probably know about this game.

Honestly, I never really understood the big appeal to it. It looks like really grainy graphics, and I couldn't understand. People were just running around building stuff to nowhere, but apparently

it's a pretty big deal because a couple of years ago Microsoft purchased this game from the developer, a guy by the name of Markus Persson, who sometimes goes by the nickname Notch. They purchased this from him for \$2.5 billion, so apparently it's a big deal.

Markus immediately retired early. He had no more work responsibilities. He bought a \$70-million house that was outfitted with a wall of candy because if it's a \$70-million house, it better have a wall of candy.

So he's driving all these exotic cars and life's one big party and all these vacations, and you would think that he would be happy. You would think that he finally achieved the American dream, but he's not. It actually turns out he feels a little miserable.

Listen to some of these Ecclesiastes-type tweets that he sent out a couple years ago. He said, "Hanging out with a bunch of friends and partying with famous people, able to do whatever I want, and I've never felt more isolated."

He said, "The problem with getting everything is you run out of reasons to keep trying, and human interaction becomes impossible due to imbalance."

He said, "When we sold the company, the biggest effort went in to making sure the employees got taken care of, and they all hate me now."

In his last tweet, he said, "Found a great girl, but she's afraid of me and my lifestyle and went with a normal person instead."

Now I doubt that very many of us, if any of us, will ever see the kind of wealth that Notch has experienced, and yet we probably know at least a little bit what it's like to chase after whatever we think will make us happy only to find that it didn't.

I don't know, maybe you're here at any one of our campuses, maybe you came because you heard about the series, somebody invited you to come, and you're not even sure what you believe or what you think about all this God stuff, but you know what it feels like to have happiness elude you when you've been chasing after it. If that's the case, we've all been there.

See, about 1,000 years before the life of Jesus and a few-thousand years before Twitter was ever invented, there was this guy by the name of Solomon, and he was so wealthy and he had so many resources that he makes Notch look like a broke college student. Solomon never looked at a price tag in his life. He had no need to. In fact, if you took all of Solomon's assets and you converted them to present-day currency values, his annual salary would have been \$760,000,000 a year. His net worth would have been \$2.1 trillion.

So he did pretty well and apparently even had his own clothing line (Aaron gestures to the Salomon shirt he's wearing). By the way, I did not do this on purpose; it was just cleaned.

Here's the thing about Solomon: He was powerful and he was charismatic, creative, and wise. At the end of his life, he was very honest and transparent and broken, remorseful, and even repentant. As an old man, Solomon puts his entire life under review, and he gets incredibly vulnerable. He admits his mistakes, his meanderings, and his misguided attempts at happiness. He basically says to all of us: Listen, I had it all several times over and happiness kept eluding me.

Solomon puts all of his thoughts, all of his journey into this journal, so to speak, that we call the book of Ecclesiastes. It's found in the Old Testament. There are two other books in the Old Testament that tell us more about Solomon, like his younger days: The book of 1 Kings and the book of Song of Songs.

It tells us that as a younger man Solomon really loved God. He asked for wisdom over things, and he was a one-woman man, but as is the case with so many people, something changed during mid-life, and things sort of went off the rails.

Unfortunately, this story is all too common. Just because Solomon had been given more wisdom than anybody else, it doesn't necessarily mean that he applied that wisdom to his life and to his daily decisions. In fact, much of the time, he didn't. He messed up a lot. But here's the thing that we surmise from it: God's grace was big enough to cover it.

As you read these journal entries that he wrote, Solomon, in many ways, seems like the original prodigal son in the sense that by the time he writes Ecclesiastes late in life, I am of the opinion that he had come back to God, that he had recognized where he had gone wrong. I really, really love that because if there is hope for Solomon after all that he had done to make a mess of things, then there is hope for you and me as well. It doesn't matter who you are, where you've been, what you've done.

So understand—this is really important for us to get; otherwise, we're going to misinterpret or misread the book of Ecclesiastes—as an older man, he is taking us back. He is taking us back to his younger, more reckless days when he was trying everything under the sun to fulfill this void that was in his soul. So he is telling us what he felt. He's reminding us of the questions that he would ask and the despair that he was feeling. And he is brutally honest. He is so honest it makes us a little bit uncomfortable because these words are unfiltered and they're even harsh at times as he is demonstrating the very real and raw emotions that come with unmet expectations.

That's one of the reasons why there are some people who question whether Solomon really wrote this book or not because you read it and you go, "Man, that doesn't sound like somebody who's actually trusting in God," but what he's doing is he's taking us back and giving us a glimpse of his thoughts and reasonings at the time that he had wandered away from God.

Throughout his journal, he keeps bringing us back to the ultimate source of meaning and fulfillment. He did it last week. This is where we left off, at the end of the chapter 2, if you were

here. Solomon says, “So, I **decided** there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I **realized**” (this is conclusion talk) “that these pleasures are from the hand of God.”

In other words, he says: There’s nothing wrong with really, really good gifts to enjoy; just don’t make them ultimate. Don’t worship the gifts, worship the giver of the gifts. So he’s saying: This is where all of my years of wandering and searching and questioning have led me.

So in chapters 1 and 2, Solomon kind of lays out his life experiment to us and he says: Man, I went on this journey and I was trying to find meaning and fulfillment. I thought it could be found in knowledge, what I could learn, but it couldn’t be found there, so I decided to abandon that track and I decided to just have a really good time and pursue it in pleasure, but couldn’t find it there either. So I decided to just achieve all that I could. I became a workaholic. I tried to advance my career, and all of that was like chasing the wind.

Many of us maybe know what it feels like to just run after whatever it is that we think will give fulfillment to our lives, and we throw our arms around it only to have it vanish. The word that Solomon uses like some 38 or 39 times in the book is meaningless. It comes from the Hebrew word *hevel*, and it just means *empty*. It just means *vanity*. It’s just a deep dissatisfaction with life.

At the beginning of chapters 3 and 4, what Solomon is going to do is he’s actually going to address a couple of the things that threaten our happiness. If you ever had a moment in your life when maybe things seemed to be going really well, maybe you’re in a great relationship, a good marriage, you’ve got great healthy kids, you’ve got a pretty good job, you love the house you live in, but you realize you’re not happy.

Have any of you ever kind of woken up one day and just said, “Man, why are we not happy? We have all these reasons to be happy, but why am I not happy?” Solomon is going to address that question. He’s going to talk about a couple of the things that threaten our happiness, and the first one is when I just can’t enjoy my current season of life. That’s one of the things that will threaten our sense of happiness.

Listen to what he writes in chapter 3 starting in verse 1. He says, “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.

Long before The Byrds ever wrote a song in the 1960s, and some of you have no idea what I’m talking about and that’s all right, Solomon pens these really kind of profound words. It’s more

than a song and it's more than a nice poem. What's he doing here? What he's doing is he is actually using these terms to describe the sweep of human emotion and experience.

There are 14 phrases in those verses that are clustered together, and both halves of these phrases tell us something about life. You might kind of think about it like bookends, like two different extremes. He says we are all born. We will all one day inevitably die. We all know what it's like to cry. We all know what it's like to laugh. We all grieve. We all dance. We all have a relationship maybe that begins, we know what that feels like, and maybe a relationship where we have to say goodbye. We acquire things only to one day have to let them go. He's covering all of life.

Now, if you're like me, as I read down through these verses this last week, my immediate desire was I wanted to read it sort of like a menu that I could order off of. And if I could order off this menu, I would say, "Yes, I'll take a hefty portion of harvest, healing, building up, laughing, dancing, embracing, mending, and love. Please hold the death, the killing, the tearing down, the grieving, the rejection, the hate, and the war, and by the way, why are these even on the menu? God, why would you even allow those things to be there?" It's a really good question. Solomon's going to get to that in a minute.

Here's the thing. This list doesn't read so much like a menu as much as it reads like the—he even uses the word—*seasons* of life. Just like nature has seasons, our life has seasons.

Now, Lindsey and I lived in California for a while, and if any of you have ever lived in the Midwest and on the west coast, maybe you'll relate to this, but I love the weather in California. I love the warmth. I love the climate, but one of the things, after about like year three, that I really started to miss, I started to miss the seasons.

To say that right now, I know, is just really insulting because we're all very, very bitter about the cold. I get that. But some of you might know what I'm talking about where I just started to really miss the variation, and as weird as it sounds, but it's true, I remember waking up in California and I'd get up in the morning and open up the blinds and look out and go, "Huh. Sunny and blue sky. Again. How depressing." It was just like sort of Groundhog Day. Now I would kind of like that, but at the time, there was zero variation.

As much as I don't like the temperature right now, this weekend, in Indianapolis, I know that here in a couple months, or four or five months if we're being honest, that the weather now is actually going to cause me to appreciate spring and summer all the more, that there's just variation to it.

Not so much even a season of life kind of thing, but this list actually also reads, you might even think about it like ingredients. All these things are the ingredients to life. If you are cooking something in the kitchen, you might have all these ingredients laid out on the table. If you ever miss something and then you taste it, you go, "Oh, there's something missing there." Then you find out what spice or what ingredient you're missing. You go, "Ahh." Now I would never like

take a handful of that spice and just pop it into my mouth, but mixed in with all the other stuff, it gives it a fuller taste.

What makes laughter so great is when you've tasted what it feels like to grieve, right? But see, it's even more than that though. As much as I hate to admit it, when looking back across my past, it hasn't been the wonderful moments, the great moments that have caused me to grow and to mature the most; it's actually been the moments of pain, trial, and difficulty. It's when I was cut from the team or denied the opportunity or confronted in love or rejected by a friend or was told that I didn't have what it takes. Each time, that opportunity presented me with a choice. It pushed me towards something; to say, "Man, I want to be part of something meaningful. I want to appreciate what it is that I've been given. I want to use this opportunity to grow and to mature."

People who are never stretched, people who never hurt, never mourn, can easily become self-centered, entitled, immature, and deeply dissatisfied with life. God loves you way too much to let that happen.

So Solomon goes on and says in verse 9, "What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all." (I love this sentence.) "Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end."

So he says the reason why we groan and we grieve and we mourn is because God has placed eternity within the human heart. Well, what's that mean? It means that we all intrinsically know that there is something wrong in the world. We all know that there is something wrong with us. Things are not as they should be, and so the whole reason why we even know to question pain and suffering is because God put that in us.

That is what it means to have eternity placed within the human heart. It's this craving, it's this desire that we have for something that should satisfy, but everything that we're chasing after isn't satisfying.

And he says God is so sovereign, which is just a fancy biblical word for in complete control, that God is in control not even just of the good things in life, but he's even in control of the harsh realities of life. He says that he will take those things and he will make them beautiful in its own time.

God is infinite in his nature, which means that he sees time all at once. You and I are finite, which means that we see it moment by moment. It's impossible for us to see time all at once. We see it in a line. God sees it all at once, and he says: I've got a perspective and a scope that is so different than what you have, and trust me, I'm in complete control of everything that's going on in life, so much in control that I can actually go back and undo the horrible things that have happened.

John talks about that in Revelation. He says trust that God is keeping a jar and he is piling away every one of the tears that you shed in this life, and one day he's going to sit down, pull that jar off the shelf, and he's going to go through and he's going to recount every tear that you've shed and he's going to explain it and he's going to redeem it.

God is in control. He's got this. And he can even take the moments that felt crushing to you and use them ultimately as a blessing.

If you've been around here for a while, you know that I'm not a big country music fan, and some of you are very, very bitter about that, but I do like me some Johnny Cash every now and then. I think Johnny Cash is in a category completely all on his own. That's an answer to prayer for some of you; I realize that—you've been praying for your pastor—but he sort of captures like this whole idea in a really silly song, but it's actually probably one of my favorite Johnny Cash songs, called *Boy Named Sue*. I want you to listen to these lyrics.

Actually, I practiced this. I wanted to do it in a Johnny Cash accent and it just kept coming across like Elvis, so I gave it up.

*It says: "Well my daddy left home when I was three
And he didn't leave much to ma and me
Just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze
Now, I don't blame him 'cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that he ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me 'Sue'*

*Well, he must o' though that is quite a joke
And it got a lot of laughs from a lot of folk
It seemed I had to fight my whole life through
Some gal would giggle and I'd get red
Some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head
I tell ya', life ain't easy for a boy named 'Sue'*

*Well, I grew up quick and I grew up mean
My fist got hard and my wits got keen
Roamed from town to town to hide my shame
But I made me a vow to the moon and stars
I'd search the honky-tonks and bars
And kill that man who gave me that awful name*

*Well, it was Gatlinburg in mid-July^[SEP] And I just hit town and my throat was dry^[SEP] I thought I'd stop
and have myself a brew^[SEP] At an old saloon on a street of mud^[SEP] There at a table dealing
stud^[SEP] Sat the dirty, mangy dog that named me 'Sue'*

Well, I knew that snake was my own sweet dad. From a worn-out picture that my mother'd had. And I knew that scar on his cheek and his evil eye. He was big and bent and gray and old. And I looked at him and my blood ran cold. And I said, 'My name is 'Sue!' How do you do? Now you gonna die!'"

That's my favorite part of the whole song, which tells you a little something about what's going on in here.

"Well, I hit him hard right between the eyes. And he went down, but to my surprise. He come up with a knife and cut off a piece of my ear. But I busted a chair across his teeth. And we crashed through the wall and into the street. Kicking and a' gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer

They need serious counseling.

I tell ya', I've fought tougher men. But I really can't remember when. He kicked like a mule and he bit like a crocodile. I heard him laugh and then I heard him cuss. He went for his gun and I pulled mine first. He stood there lookin' at me and I saw him smile"

Now listen to this.

*"And he said, 'Son, this world is rough. And if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough. And I knew I wouldn't be there to help ya' along. So I give ya' that name and I said goodbye. I knew you'd have to get tough or die. **And it's the name that helped to make you strong'***

'Yeah,' he said, 'Now you fought one heck of a fight. And I know you hate me, and you got the right. To kill me now, and I wouldn't blame you if you do. But ya' ought to thank me before I die. For the gravel in ya' guts and the spit in ya' eye. Cause I'm the guy that named you 'Sue'. Yeah what could I do'

*And I got all choked up and I threw down my gun. And I called him my pa, and he called me his son. **And I come away with a different point of view.** And I think about him now and then. Every time I try and every time I win"*

It's a silly song. It has a profound truth. As I look back across some of the most painful, difficult moments of my life, those have been the moments that have produced the most growth in me. It's not that I would wish bad, hard, painful moments on anybody, and it's not to say that I even celebrate them or look forward to them, but it's just to know that when I look back across my life, my spiritual growth and emotional growth are almost always linked to something difficult.

It's recognizing that I try to live my life in such a way to dodge failure, and yet failure might be one of the best gifts that you and I could ever receive. It's a gift in disguise revealing that you

and I, we are loved more for who we are than what we accomplish, what we achieve, and what we acquire, and some of us desperately need to hear that.

It's been the valleys of my marriage to my wife that have deepened my affections for her, not just the good times. It's been the financial strains that have motivated me to be a better steward with the resources that God has temporarily entrusted to me. It's been the interpersonal conflict with people that I really love that has actually equipped me with greater empathy towards others and develop my people skills, not just the people I have a natural chemistry with.

Good times are really, really great and I'm thankful for them, and I hope you have tons of them. This is why I think Solomon keeps saying that we should seize upon the good moments and enjoy life when they arise. Look at what he says in chapter 3:12. He says, "So I concluded there is nothing better than **to be happy** and enjoy ourselves as long as we can," and some of you are like, "I had no idea that sentence was in the Bible. I thought the Bible was all about removing anything that could be fun. But in verse 13, he says, "And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are **gifts from God**. And I know that whatever God does is final."

Why does he say this? Well, because he says that good moments, they come and they go and they are never guaranteed, so when they are in front of you, seize upon them and enjoy it in the moment.

Jesus would say the exact same thing in Matthew 6:4. He'd say: Don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will worry about itself, and trust that what it means for God to be in complete control is that no matter what it is that you and I are facing or how absent he might appear or how much sense it just doesn't seem to make to you, God's got this, both the good, the bad, and even the painful things. And he is so good, and he is so in control that he can take what appears to be out of control and use it to build us up and make us stronger.

That's what it means when he says he'll make it beautiful in his own time. Solomon says there is so much to life that it's just simply out of our control and you've got to trust it to the one who is in control.

Our line of vision really determines everything, and if it's exclusively fixed upon our circumstances, experiences, and acquisitions under the sun, then that's ultimately going to leave us feeling very, very empty and happiness will just continue to elude us.

I want to give you this definition of faith. It's not the only definition of faith, but it's one that I think can help us. It is faith is really fostering, or you might use the word developing, your ability to look beyond your circumstances "under the sun," so faith is not something that is blind, faith is not just checking your brain at the door, faith is all about developing your vision and not just looking at the changing circumstances that are in front of you under the sun, but looking at a God who is beyond the sun who says: Hey, I've got it all in control. Learn to trust

me more than your feelings or logic,” and it’s to recognize that this world is not just a collection of our circumstances.

If we allow it to, then we’re always just one bad circumstance away from us having happiness just elude us, just one bad phone call, one health scare, one unexpected bill in the mail, and all those things are inevitably around the corner. We are just not able to pick and to choose what we will experience in life and what we will insulate ourselves from.

Solomon says life is a package deal. You’ve got birth; you’ve got death. You’ve got health; you’ve got sickness. You’ve got joy; you’ve got sorrow. You’ve got good times; you’ve got bad. It’s all wrapped up into one, and some of us, including yours truly, can become so paranoid about the bad things that could happen and most likely, given enough time, probably will happen, that we end up missing out on enjoying the life that is right in front of us and another opportunity to grow.

Solomon keeps saying this. He says: Listen, there are just so many things you can’t control, so you might as well trust God and enjoy life. In fact, if I were to give a pretty good, like one-statement summary of Ecclesiastes, that might be what I would give you, that Ecclesiastes is basically just saying trust God and enjoy life, that he’s got it. I know it stings and I know it hurts and I know it doesn’t make sense, but trust that there is a God who is in control of it.

The second thing that can threaten our happiness is when I keep envying somebody else’s circumstances or the season of life that someone else is in. Have you ever done that? You’re looking at the season of life someone else is in. You go like, “Wow. They really have it all together, and if I just had what they have, then I’d be happy.”

In chapter 4:4, Solomon writes, “Then I observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors.” Keeping up with the Joneses. “But this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind. Fools fold their idle hands, leading them to ruin.” In other words, somebody that is very, very lazy.

Verse 6. “And yet, better to have one handful with quietness than two handfuls with hard work and chasing the wind.” In other words, it’s better to have somebody who’s working hard but keeping their life balanced because they’re connecting with others than somebody who’s a workaholic and they never take time to develop relationships.

See, he wrote this 3,000 years ago and he just described our culture to a T. And we can conclude that if we can’t control our circumstances, well then we’ll just compare ourselves with others or we’ll try to present ourselves in such a way that seems as if we’re happier than what we really are.

It’s so easy to compare our insides with other people’s outsides and just make ourselves more and more miserable.

It's easy to look at a guy like actor Shia LaBeouf. I don't know if I'm pronouncing his name right or not. Shay LaBuff, Shy LaBoofay, whatever. I don't know. Just say it confidently and people think you know what you're talking about.

You look at a guy like this, thought that he was hilarious in the *Transformer* movies. He's really talented, good-looking guy, seems to be super-successful. You'd look at him and go, "Well, I don't think he has any problems. He's probably happy." Listen to what he writes. "Sometimes I feel I'm living a meaningless life. I know I'm one of the luckiest dudes in America right now. I have a great house. My parents don't have to work. I've got money. I'm famous. But it could all change, man. It could go away. You never know...I don't handle fame well." That is strikingly vulnerable. "Most actors on most days don't think they're worthy. I have no idea where this insecurity comes from, but it's a God-sized hole. If I knew, I'd fill it, and I'd be on my way."

Would he? Because I think the reason why he even knows to say something like this is because God has placed eternity within his heart and there's a God-sized hole—he used the word—that he's trying to fill with all kinds of things and he's constantly searching.

You sit there and think to yourself, "Okay, a guy like that who's talented and in these movies. Man, if happiness is eluding him, then I'm not going to find it through those channels either." So it's easy to compare ourselves, and what ends up happening is when we're just looking at circumstances and when we're just looking at comparisons, then we end up cutting ourselves off from others.

We could say it this way: We sacrifice connection for achievement.

Let's finish this up. In chapter 4 verse 7, Solomon says, "I observed yet **another example** of something meaningless under the sun. This is the case of a man who is **all alone**, without a child or a brother, yet who works hard to gain as much wealth as he can. But then he asks himself, 'Who am I working for? Why am I giving up so much pleasure now?' It is all so meaningless and depressing. Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. **But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.** Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."

Solomon would write something very, very similar in Proverbs. He paints a vivid picture here of what isolation looks and feels like. Like what good does it do for you to put in all the overtime and for you to work and work and work and work so that you can provide for your family and retire early if they're alienated from you and you're not building very meaningful connections? You're just never available to engage.

One of the greatest gifts that we have is connection with other people, and some personality types see that more clearly and are better at it than other personality types, but it's true for all

of us. And he says that we are all striving for happiness and we look for it in circumstances. We'll never find it there. We look for it in comparisons. We'll never find it there. We end up in those pursuits, cutting us off from connections with others.

Dr. Henry Cloud is an author and a psychologist. He has written a number of books. Maybe you recognize that name from the *Boundaries* books, which I highly recommend. Dr Cloud is a follower of Jesus, and he takes biblical principles and really merges them with the field of psychology and social sciences.

He's written a book called *The Law of Happiness*, where he actually kind of shows us what research has shown and then he kind of backs it up with some of these biblical principles. I love what he says in the book. He says, "When we are pursuing the things that don't have the power to make us happy, we are ignoring the ones that do." Once again, it's where our line of vision is, so he says research shows that less than 10% of our circumstances account for true and lasting happiness.

Now circumstantial happiness is great. It's a gift and that's all that it is, so just receive it as a gift. So when you get good news, when you get the new phone, when you get the unexpected check in the mail, whatever it is. Circumstantial happiness, I mean that's great, but it's got a shelf life. It's not going to sustain. It's not going to take you through the distance of your life, especially when you're in the season of winter.

So he says less than 10% of our circumstances actually account for true happiness and actually leads us through all the things that they found through research. I love when research backs up what we already know in the Bible.

He says happy people, first of all, are givers, and the Bible tells us that. He's like they're just very generous people.

Happy people, they don't wait for "someday." They seize upon the moment. That's what Solomon talks about in Ecclesiastes.

Happy people pursue their goals. They don't just say, "Hey, I'll get to that eventually." They pursue it.

Happy people fully engage. They're not disconnected from others.

Happy people connect with others. He actually has this really interesting tidbit in the book. He says that having healthy connections with other people is a greater predictor of future health than nutrition and exercise combined. Do you realize what that means? That means that it's better to have chocolate cake with friends than a salad alone! That can be found in 1 Brockettlonians 1:1. Memorize that verse.

He says happy people, they just don't feel the need to compare themselves.

Happy people think well. They develop good thought patterns.

Happy people are grateful people, and they express it.

Happy people are quick to forgive.

Happy people have a calling. In other words, they live for something bigger than themselves.

Happy people have faith.

Here's the thing. The big mantra in our society today—have you noticed it?—is do what makes you happy. So why aren't we? Why aren't we happy? If we're chasing after and doing what we think will make us happy, why aren't we?

Happiness cannot be found by pursuing happiness. This is what we conclude out of Ecclesiastes chapters 3 and 4. Don't chase after whatever you think will make you happy. Chase after God and meaningfully connect with others, and happiness will find you. When happiness finds you, that's lasting and that will actually take you through some of the difficult seasons of life.

Now listen. This is not just a bunch of self-help mumbo-jumbo because Jesus said the exact same thing. Jesus would say the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and your strength. That's what I mean by chase after God. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. Meaningfully connect with others.

So all of what Solomon is saying in chapters 3 and 4 is that life is going to be filled with good moments and bad moments—it's a package deal—and when you just chase after happiness, it will constantly elude you, but he says keep your focus upon God and meaningfully connect with others and you will wake up consistently, regardless of your circumstances, and say, "I'm happy. I'm fulfilled." Why? Because God has placed eternity within your heart.

Let's pray. Father, we come to you right now, and I thank you for how relevant and how true your word is even when we don't give it that kind of credit. So, father, I pray that as a people we would make a resolve at the beginning of the year to chase after you with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and that we would take the time to meaningfully slow down and connect with others.

Help us to live for something beyond ourselves, beyond our own happiness, that it can be found when we serve others, knowing that you're a good, good God and you'll give us what our heart desires. We ask this right now in Jesus' name. Amen.