

August 3, 2025

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26:

“Simply to Thy Cross I Cling”

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Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

James Hervey Johnson was an American writer, atheist, and self-proclaimed "freethinker." He published works with titles such as "Superior Men," "There Is No God," and "Religion Is a Gigantic Fraud." He sounds like a *real* joy to be around, doesn't he? In one of his stronger critiques of religion, he wrote:

"Intelligent men do not decide any subject until they have carefully examined both or all sides of it. Fools, cowards, and those too lazy to think, accept blindly, without examination, dogmas and doctrines imposed upon them in childhood by their parents, priests, and teachers, when their minds were immature and they could not reason."

Would it surprise you to hear that I agree with a small part of what he's saying? Indeed, "fools, cowards, and those too lazy to think accept blindly." That's true enough since faith is certainly not opposed to thought. True faith is informed, full of facts from eye-witness testimony, examined, taught, and rooted in the Word. It is not blind to the things of God, but it wrestles with the hard and often life-altering things of Scripture. And far from being a sign of weakness, returning again and again to the teachings of Scripture is the mark of maturity and strength that comes from the Holy Spirit working in us.

But where Johnson and nearly every atheist who makes this argument go wrong is in the assumption that Christian doctrine is something blindly imposed, something we've passively inherited and never questioned. That somehow, as we grow older, we are either unwilling or unable to see through falsehood. As if faith were the result of intellectual laziness or childhood manipulation. Funny enough, if our faith is this way, there's a chance we don't have faith at all. How can one know Christ without *knowing* Christ? With that, I've found that kids often reason better than their parents!

Johnson believed that faith is a crutch for the weak, an escape for those too lazy to think, and a system designed to manipulate the gullible. His god was his intellect, and such is the case for all without Christ. And yet, ironically, for all his intellect, for all his confident rejection of Christianity, he ended up in the exact same place as the preacher in Ecclesiastes 2: frustrated, empty, and staring into the futility of life. This is the place where we all end up when we examine all sides of the unbelieving world we live in. The hardest pill in this life for us to swallow is that no matter how much you learn, no matter how hard you work, no matter how put together or successful your life may seem, no matter what you believe or hold on to, in the end, you are still going to die. With that, the nagging question that all humans face remains: What was it all for?

I. Restless Hearts

What's striking about that question is that it puts humanity on an equal playing field with one another. Sooner or later, every person asks it, whether in youth or in old age, whether after failure or even after success, we all come face to face with that uncomfortable uncertainty. It's a deeply human question, and it comes with grief, frustration, and restlessness throughout life. It distracts us from joy and, above all, it keeps us from focusing on what truly matters.

Take a moment to reflect on where your focus has been throughout your life. I know mine. From childhood on, my thoughts were consumed by the future, whether it was career plans, personal goals, or building a life. I spent a lot of energy laying foundations for things I hoped might come. (Unfortunately, becoming an astronaut-cowboy-philanthropist-trillionaire didn't pan out.) But what stands out when I look back is how often my energy was spent chasing after things I couldn't control in the first place. I think we all can agree that when we look back, the same conclusion is reached. That, the Preacher says, is the problem at the center of it all. And he gives it a name: **vanity**. It's all chasing after the wind.

This vanity, the things which we tend to hold on to, all result in a restless heart that longs for a settled life that is not hurt or impacted by change. When we take the time to examine our lives, we find that we long for joy, but instead, we experience restlessness because of sin. Ecclesiastes 2 exposes that restless heart in all of us. It states, "What has a man for all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night, his heart does not rest. This also is vanity."

To find that joy and that peace we long for, we toil with the tasks of the earth by getting our ducks in a row. If it isn't working to get them in a row, we're certainly fooling ourselves into thinking we have it all together, as if we have conquered all there is to conquer. The truth is, we will never have it all together in this life. Sin has corrupted the world to its core, and no matter how we toil, sin remains until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Romans 8 states,

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

II. Find Enjoyment in The Toil

Praise and thanks be to God that Paul in Romans 8 and the Preacher of Ecclesiastes both don't leave us in this state of hopelessness, vanity, and futility. They point us to something better. Something that doesn't come from our hands or our striving, but from God's hand alone. What these Spirit-inspired writers understood is that because of sin, there is absolutely nothing we can do to escape this vanity on our own. Getting our act together and striving to be better isn't

enough, and it never has been. Every attempt to find a special or secret meaning in life apart from God ends in chasing after the wind. But when God's righteous hand, through His Son Jesus Christ, steps into the fray and when He takes upon Himself the burden of our labor, our sorrow, our death, then and only then, do our eyes begin to widen.

Christ Jesus, stepping into creation and into our very predicament, became the most important thing to ever happen to this weary world and to the lifetime of toil we face. He did not remain distant from the struggles of this life, but came in the flesh, working with His hands, walking the same cursed ground as we do. What comfort it is to know that our Savior can "sympathize with our weaknesses." (Hebrews 4:15) By His cross and resurrection, He redeems not just our souls but our days, our work, our rest, our moments under the sun. In Him, toil is no longer meaningless. It becomes a gift. A place where God is present. A rhythm shaped not by futility, but by grace. Christ doesn't just give us peace, He gives us joy amidst the toil, because now, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death with Him. And that, the Preacher says, is from the hand of God.

So, when you look at your life, when you examine those things that you have no control over, remember these words from Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also...is from the hand of God." God is not asking you to fix it all. You can't. He is not asking you to make your life look more put-together than it is. You can't. He is giving you something better than all those things for which we toil. By faith, He has given you Himself. In Christ Jesus, we have the one who gives us the certainty in the gift of forgiveness that all will be well in the end. With that comes joy in the midst of the toil and peace and comfort in our daily work. This is because God's righteous hand is guiding everything toward one goal and one goal only: our entrance into the Eternal Kingdom.

III. "Simply to Thy Cross I Cling"

Therefore, through faith in Christ, given to us by the Holy Spirit, life becomes black and white for the believer. That is not to say it is easy, painless, without its hardships, or without its struggles with sin, but it becomes simple when we realize that our eternity is not riding on our success. This is why our sermon hymn for today beautifully exclaims, "Nothing in my hand I bring, / **Simply to Thy cross I cling.**" That is the only view of the world that can bring true and lasting peace to our restless hearts.

When we cling to the cross and let go of our tight grip on the illusion of control over our lives, we are then able to see the truth about vanity and the truth about Christ and His everlasting rule over our hearts and over our minds. We see His sufficiency not that we walk through life with a, "Jesus take the wheel" attitude, but that when we are pressured on all sides by the strain of this life, we are brought to the comfort that no matter what happens, good or bad, His goal for us is paradise with no toil, no vanity, no chasing after the wind. Success, security, and stability are not bad things, but they are nothing compared to what Jesus can and does do for us.

When the Preacher says that finding enjoyment in our toil is “from the hand of God,” this is not some vague encouragement to look on the bright side of a hard life. It is a call to receive our lives as a gift, not because they are perfect, but because they come from the hand of a perfect Savior. In Christ, your work has value. In Christ, your rest is holy. In Christ, your joy is real even when the circumstances of your life try to tell you otherwise.

James Hervey Johnson thought faith was for the weak and for those too afraid to examine life honestly. But Ecclesiastes and the Gospel teach us that only the honest can have true faith. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 9:10) Only the one who is brought by the Word to look at the world, see its futility, feel the ache of it, and then cling to Christ is the person who has truly seen clearly. Because at the end of the road, no matter how wise, how successful, or how skeptical you’ve been, you will still die. And in that moment, it won’t be your intellect or your accomplishments or your control that will matter. It will be the cross.

So, eat, drink, work, rest, laugh, and cry, but do it all in the knowledge that your Savior has already done the one thing that matters most: He has forgiven you of all your sin. And because of that, nothing in your life is meaningless, not even the toil. All of it now flows from the hand of God. And in the end, that same hand will lift you up and lead you home.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott