Announcements:
2/7 @7:30 -
   Prayer
2/8 @6:30 -
   Grace Group
2/11 @8:30 -
   Sunday School
2/11 @6:00 -
   Family Night
   SMALL GROUPS

ICE BREAKER: What jobs or hobbies bring you the most joy?

READ: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

This passage marks the beginning of the journey that the Preacher will make to seek to uncover meaning and purpose in life. Later, he will talk about some of the "usual suspects" that we would likely hear if we were to give a poll to everyone around us. Pleasure or having a good time, living wisely and working hard will all take center stage eventually. But here, the focus is on being wise and gaining wisdom. Spoiler alert: This is not the answer. Ultimately he will give us a (rather depressing) proverb: "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." (1:18) But what could be the source of this vexation and sorrow? A bulk of it is what he has said earlier. One of the central thoughts is that wisdom leads us to know and understand that "It is an unhappy business that God has given the children of man to be busy with." (1:13) It is this "unhappy business" that we will spend our time here looking at.

The first thing that we need to wrestle with is the thought that the business that we have set before us is "unhappy". What does this word actually mean? The Hebrew word here is rather short (*ra*), but also filled with meaning. One Bible dictionary defines *ra* as "Characterized by distress or affliction or danger or need". This is a slightly stronger sense than we might first think of when we read "unhappy". Thus the whole picture is something much more dire. What has God tasked the children of man with? Without mincing words, it is work that is distressing, painful, and often dangerous. Yet it needs to be done. On a more comical level this is doing all the dishes then cooking dinner and realizing that the sinks are full again. On a more honest level, it is being tasked with raising kids and then realizing the pain and distress that they can cause us. On a more theological level, this is realizing that, because of the effects of sin, "cursed is the ground because of you, in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plant of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground." (Genesis 3:17b-19a). In reality, I would argue that this third type of thinking is the main issue that the Preacher is driving us to see!

DISCUSS: Why is it important to understand the root cause of the "unhappy" work that is set before us (namely the curse)? In what ways can we see the work of God set before us as "unhappy"? In what ways should we be careful in saying this?

But there is one more thought that we should wrestle with in this text. Here I would ask it as a question: Can we ever hope to find happiness in this unhappy work? The answer is a responding "yes!" But then how do we get there? I see two ways. The first is just by reflecting on our lives (and the heart of the icebreaker question). Sometimes, the hard work itself is the reward. There is a lasting peace that comes from a job well done. There are few feelings more rewarding than sitting down exhausted after a hard day's work. Sure, it is often distressing and painful, yet there is often a reward for the labor. The second, though, is much more important. To quote the Preacher: "It is an unhappy business *that God has given*". The happiness comes not in the work, but in service to the God that we work *for*. As Paul would say: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord." (Colossians 3:23). Whatever trouble, or difficult thing that is set before you, the happiness comes in knowing the sovereign king of heaven that sent that your way. *This* is where happiness is truly found!

DISCUSS: How can knowing God sent the work change our attitude towards it? Can you think of any examples (either in your life, others, or even Scripture) where we see this being true?