

Why am I never satisfied?

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[0 : 00] John McEnroe enjoyed tremendous success in his tennis career. But listen to what he said in his autobiography called *Serious*. He said, I should have been on top of the world.

But on October the 1st, 1984, I was standing in the Portland airport waiting to board a flight to L.A. for a week off. And suddenly I thought, I am the greatest tennis player who ever lived.

Why am I so empty inside? He goes on. The feeling had been building up for a while. I'd been number one for four years and I never felt especially happy.

That's John McEnroe. But we can mention many more stories of the rich and famous who, despite success on the outside, have felt empty and unhappy on the inside.

Perhaps you feel that inner dissatisfaction and unhappiness yourself. Because as human beings, we long for satisfaction and contentment in life. We want to know what we should do to be happy.

[1 : 04] And this is nothing new. It's written about in our Bible reading from Ecclesiastes, which is thousands of years old. You just heard about the search for satisfaction and happiness from Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 12 to chapter 2, verse 26.

And interestingly, psychologist Professor Jonathan Haidt picks up on this in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*. The essence of his book is to integrate modern science with ancient wisdom when it comes to what makes us happy.

And in one of his chapters, he actually begins by quoting some words from the teacher of Ecclesiastes. Haidt says, So the search for satisfaction and happiness is timeless and universal because we want to find satisfaction in a world, but nothing fails to satisfy.

And why is that? Well, Ecclesiastes helps us make sense of life so that we don't strive for satisfaction in the wrong places. We've reached the main body of Ecclesiastes now where the teacher appears center stage to tell us about his search for meaning.

He explores the very best that life has to offer in search of satisfaction. It's like he takes on the mantle of King Solomon to see whether living with a king's privileges makes any difference.

[2 : 39] So just imagine Jordan Peterson, Kim Kardashian, Bill Gates, J.K. Rowling and Donald Trump all rolled into one. Because what he's doing here is he is experimenting with education, with pleasure, with success, with wisdom and with work to seek satisfaction.

And he invites us to watch him journey down these different roads in life. He narrates his way with a series of stories. And like stories on Instagram or Facebook, he shares his significant moments with us.

He's got a story for each road he travels down. And so we see him go down five roads. First, education. Second, pleasure. Third, success.

Fourth, wisdom. And fifth, work. So first of all, education. Chapter 1, verse 12 to 18. The teacher begins by trying the intellectual route in search of satisfaction.

He applies his mind to study and explore everything that's done in this material world. And it's a comprehensive examination of life. So he starts by assuming that if he can increase in wisdom, if he can expand his knowledge, and if he can seek understanding of the world, then everything will make sense.

[3 : 59] I'm sure he had read the best literature. He'd studied the sciences. He'd engaged in philosophy. And he'd learned from the greatest minds. After all, how many times have we heard it said that what we need is better education?

If only we were better educated, then we'd have less problems and the world would be a better place. But he says it's all meaningless, like chasing after the wind.

Have you ever tried to chase the wind? Of course not, because it's pointless. And so is the pursuit of knowledge and the hope that it will satisfy.

Now, of course, we're not knocking education because it wasn't the failure of education or in education that brought dissatisfaction to the teacher.

It wasn't because he'd wasted his student grant and skived his classes. No, it was in his achievement as a first class student that he found everything to be meaningless.

[4 : 59] He'd been to the top university. He had more letters after his name than in his name. But he found that filling his mind could not satisfy his soul. And that's why some of the most intelligent people can often be the most tortured inside.

Today, we have far more educational opportunities than previous generations. We have more knowledge and information at our fingertips than ever before. And yet studies have shown that the more advanced a society grows, the more common is depression.

And of course, we know there is more education about racism today, but it doesn't seem to help racial justice. There is more sex education for young people, but there are more teenage abortions than ever.

And so the notion that education will solve our problems is a myth. Education is vital and it doesn't form, but it has no power to change or satisfy deep down inside.

And that's what the teacher found out. And it exasperated him. So he says, And I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly.

[6 : 13] But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief.

And so he ended up in a far worse place after his search for satisfaction in education. And that's what happens when you try to make sense of life without God.

So that's education. Secondly, pleasure. Listen. I said to myself, Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.

But that also proved to be meaningless. So he sought satisfaction by trying hedonism. His motto was, have a blast while it lasts.

And of course, he had limitless resources at his disposal. So everything was his for the asking or for the taking. And so he thought a good laugh would help.

[7 : 08] After all, isn't it a sign that we're enjoying ourselves? It's said that laughter is the best medicine. But the teacher discovered laughter is madness. And so he might have been in stitches at the comedy club in Jerusalem as he listened to the best comedians.

But as soon as he walked onto the street, the feeling quickly wore off. Woody Allen, the comic genius, said, Most of the time, I don't have much fun.

The rest of the time, I don't have any fun at all. Next, the teacher tried a good drink. Listen. I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom.

Perhaps a good night down the pub with his mates or maybe enjoying some fine wine from his well-stocked cellar. Whatever it was, he didn't overdo it because he says his mind was still guiding him with wisdom.

But as he stared into a full glass, all he saw was the reflection of an empty life. Any feeling of joy he had didn't last.

[8 : 17] And so he discovered the paradox of pleasure. That is, the more you have, the less satisfied you are. Robert Burns in Tam O'Shanter says, Pleasure is good, but it disappears.

That's why Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones sang, I can't get no satisfaction. I can't get no satisfaction because I try and I try and I try and I try.

I can't get no satisfaction. And so the point the teacher is making is that pleasure doesn't accomplish anything. It fails to deliver.

And so it isn't the solution to the futility of life. So he's tried education. He's tried pleasure. Third, he tries success in verse 4 to 11.

He meditates on his search for satisfaction through success. And his story here in chapter 2, verse 4 to 11, is virtually parallel with King Solomon's reign in 1 Kings chapter 3 to chapter 11.

[9 : 38] And so he's asking, Will making a name for myself and leaving my mark make me happy? The thought is, If I'm successful, famous, wealthy and powerful, surely I'll be satisfied.

So what did he do? Well, he says, I undertook great projects. So he explored architecture and real estate. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.

He built new houses, not just one, but many in his massive estate. Perhaps a castle, a cottage, a beach house, a penthouse, a flat in the West End. And he also explored horticulture because he

says he planted vineyards.

I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. So he didn't need any help from Alan Titchmarsh or Gardener's World. He made his own novel arrangements.

And he explored engineering. Listen, Sounds like he's trying to recreate the Garden of Eden only without God.

[10:51] And if he's not just seeking to be a success here, he's actually seeking to play God. Because he then describes his power over people. He says, I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.

So he explored management. He would headhunt for the best slaves. He didn't do his cleaning or cooking or ironing. He got his large entourage to look after his every need.

And he explored agriculture and farming. He says, I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. He's not boasting here.

He's merely stating the facts. He was a good businessman. And so he had a monopoly on the livestock. He also explored investment. Listen, he says, I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces.

So he stockpiled silver and gold. He had the biggest hedge funds, the most lucrative stocks and shares, and he made plenty of profit to fill his Swiss bank accounts.

[11:56] He had valuables and antiques in his personal museum, a bit like the borough collection. He also explored entertainment. He says, I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart.

So he got the best musicians and singers to play all around his extensive home. Perhaps Ed Sheeran in the lounge. Adele in the conservatory.

He could have anything he wanted whenever he wanted it, even people.

This is wine, wine, woman and song. The delights of a man's heart, he says. Now, his story here fits with what we know of Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Sadly, Solomon's wives led him astray, whereas the teacher here insists that he was always in control throughout his experiment. He says, I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

[13:08] In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.

There was nothing he didn't try in his search for satisfaction. He was the epitome of success. He'd be on the cover of Forbes magazine and interviewed about the secrets of his success.

And yet he didn't let success go to his head because he still kept his feet firmly planted on the ground. It was all part of his experiment, you see, to explore whether this kind of life would satisfy.

So he says, Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. Perhaps he discovered this in a quiet moment one evening as he sat on his balcony watching the sunset. As he looked over his vast estate with its beautiful buildings, with its fertile vineyards, its well-bred animals, and his hard-working servants.

[14:23] Perhaps he just realised that despite having achieved so much, he still wasn't satisfied. He was left singing along with Bono and U2, but I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

The story of his success had proved to be just another dead end. It was all meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

And yet many people continue to be stuck in the rat race, investing their time and their energy in what will never truly satisfy. So these are the roads he's tried.

Education, pleasure, success. Fourthly, wisdom. That's what he tries next. He says, When I turn my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly, what more can the king's successor do than what has already been done?

So what did he find? Well, he says, I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. So wisdom is better than folly, but there's still a massive problem.

[15:33] What is it? Death. He goes on, The wise have eyes on their heads while the fool walks in the darkness. But I came to realise that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself, The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? I said to myself, This too is meaningless, for the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered.

The days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die. He discovered that no matter how wise you are, you still die.

Death makes no distinction between the wise and the foolish. So you can become the most successful person ever and live a very wise life, but you still die, just like the fool.

And so to add insult to injury, you're soon forgotten about and nobody will remember you anyway. And so there's no advantage at the end of the day. It's all meaningless.

[16:44] Doesn't he leave us with a thoroughly depressing state of affairs? And yet he's not done yet. He's got another story to tell. He wants us to watch him navigate his way through the world of work.

So education, pleasure, success, wisdom, and fifth, work in verse 17 to 23. He didn't need to work, but he wanted to explore whether work would fulfil him.

And so he became a workaholic and discovered that while work is good, it also fails to satisfy. So he says, So I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.

All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. And listen to the words that he uses about work.

Hated, grievous, meaningless, toil, despair, a great misfortune, anxious striving, grief, and pain.

Ever felt like that about work? Well, why is he talking this way? It's because he'd have to leave all that he'd worked hard for to someone else.

[17:56] And who knows whether they'd squander it after he'd gone. All those years of effort and toil could so easily be wasted by a son who, rather than take over the family business, just wants to chase waves in a Volkswagen camper van.

And so it was all meaningless, leaving everything you've poured your life into to someone who hasn't worked for it. Now he's forcing us to deal with the reality that we'd probably rather avoid. Like, what does all our hard work really achieve? Listen, he says, what do people get from all the toil and anxious striving with which they labour under the sun?

All their days, their working is grief and pain. Even at night, their minds do not rest. This, too, is meaningless. You see, work doesn't just take up your whole day.

It also takes up your nights, too, because it keeps you awake. And even when you're on holiday, you can't enjoy it because you're still thinking about work. Work causes anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, ulcers, and heart attacks.

[19:09] For what? For a better standard of living? Possibly. A better quality of life? Probably not. But thankfully, the teacher realised this before it was too late.

And that's why we will be bitterly disappointed if we expect work to fully satisfy us. So, the teacher has shared a different story for each road he's travelled down.

He searched for satisfaction in education, pleasure, success, wisdom, and work. But they failed to bring about the satisfaction he craved.

Not because they're bad in themselves, but because they can't fulfil the deepest desires of our hearts. So, what can? Well, the teacher eventually gives us a glimmer of hope.

And so, the final verses in 24 to 26 of Ecclesiastes 2 anticipate what the rest of Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible fill out for us.

[20:14] And so, the teacher encourages us to view life from another perspective. Not the meaningless chasing after the wind under the sun perspective without God, but a perspective that takes God into account.

Listen to what he says. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.

For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? He says, everything comes from the hand of God in the first place. And so, there's a shift from despair to joy because life is a gift from God that should be fully enjoyed.

And so, God gives us all these good things and he gives us the ability to enjoy them. And so, if we live life without God, we will struggle to find satisfaction.

That's why we can never be satisfied by the gift themselves, but only by the giver. God made us to worship, love, enjoy, and be satisfied in him.

[21:24] And so, when we worship, love, and enjoy God more, we won't expect too much from everything else. We won't look to other things to provide the satisfaction that only God can.

The teacher says, to the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness. But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who

pleases God.

This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. So, we will never find satisfaction if we reject God to seek satisfaction elsewhere.

Augustine, the great Christian philosopher, says at the beginning of his confessions, you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

Because we were made for God, nothing can ever give us the satisfaction that only God can. And so, Ecclesiastes wants us to recognise that we should enjoy life as a gift.

[22 : 30] Because when we do, we won't seek satisfaction by grabbing at all there is, but we'll treat life as a gift from God and be grateful for all that he gives.

Miroslav Volf in his book, Flourishing, says, attachment to God amplifies and deepens enjoyment of the world. So, investing our lives in knowing God will never diminish our lives, only enhance them. And so, the good news is that God has not left us in dissatisfied despair. He hasn't abandoned the human race to search for meaning and to seek satisfaction by ourselves.

When we try, it is meaningless. It is a chasing after the wind. But instead, God comes to us with sacrificial and saving love in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in John 10, verse 10, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full. Fullness of life won't come without Jesus.

[23 : 37] Jesus gave his life by dying on a cross for our sin and rising again to give us eternal life. and we receive this life now by turning from our sin and trusting in Jesus.

So we need to choose which road we will go down. We will go down the one where we recognise God as the giver of all good gifts and as the giver of the ultimate gift of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the narrow road that leads to life and the ability to enjoy all the good things that God gives us. Or we can go our own way and strive for satisfaction without God.

But that's the broad road which is full of dissatisfaction and ultimately leads to destruction. So Ecclesiastes is a warning to show us how to navigate our way through life, to point us back to our creator because we were made for a relationship with him.

And it's only when we enter into a relationship with the living God, the God who made us, will we find true meaning and lasting satisfaction in life.

[24 : 55] Let's pray. We thank you, loving God, for your gift of life and the ability to enjoy it. Teach us not to look to the temporary things of this world for satisfaction.

Help us to invest our lives in knowing, loving and worshipping you as we celebrate the fullness of life that comes to us in Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.