

The Experiment of Pleasure-Seeking

📖 Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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📅 October 11, 2017

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Last Wednesday I had a lecture by Dr John Flipsie Walvoord played. Dr Walvoord was the president of Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952-1986. He was a world-renowned expert in the area of prophetic studies and he is mentioned here often. My thought was to give you the opportunity to listen to him personally so you get first-hand contact with his teaching and I hope you enjoyed it. In my future absences I'll give you the opportunity to hear Louis Sperry Chafer, J. Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie, and others, as part of a series I'll call A Voice From the Past. The reason I want you to hear these men is because you've heard these names but you haven't heard them personally. And I think it's important to understand our heritage and the best way to do that is to listen to what they taught. Dr Walvoord's topic was the believer's experience in heaven and I hope this was encouraging to you in light of Julie Brazell's recent passing from our presence into the presence of the Lord. It gives us hope by reminding us of what awaits us on the other side.

Tonight we return to our study of *The Book of Ecclesiastes: Life Under the Sun*. The reason this series is titled *Life Under the Sun* is because Solomon used this phrase to alert us to the fact that what he is reporting here is his experience of trying to live life without God at the center, without respect to God, and trying to find fulfillment and significance all on his own. And, of course, it's a negative example. He's warning us how not to live, how not to do it. And I think it's interesting that he did not use the covenant name of God, which is YHWH in this book, but he used the name Elohim, which was a common name of God used by Gentiles. And coupling with this the fact that he did not name himself but identified himself as the king in Jerusalem who was greater than all prior kings, it makes me think that he wrote this to be sent out to the surrounding Gentile nations as his final testimony to them. It seems he was reaching out in his last days to try to preserve the testimony to the nations that the God of Israel is the one true God, despite his idiocy, and that apart from him you can't find meaning, significance or fulfillment in life. He would be trying to appeal to them to leave their pagan ways and come to the one true God of Israel. Of course, it also appeals to believers who want to try to live by the flesh and it's a diatribe against living by the flesh. So that's the approach and the lesson is that there is only one way to enjoy life, and that is by putting God at the center of all your activities.

Now we've worked through chapter 1, the theme is vanity and the sub theme is under the sun, so putting it all together, life is vanity when it is lived under the sun, that is to say, life is worthless when lived without God at the center. And how Solomon came to this conclusion is laid out for us in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. This is where Solomon stated his procedure for investigating life under the sun. In 1:12 he stated his advantages over the average person for making a thorough investigation. He was king over Israel in Jerusalem. That meant he had tremendous resources. More resources than you will ever have to conduct his investigation. In verse 13 he explained his procedure. He made up his mind to do an in depth and broad search for meaning by way of personal experience. By breadth he meant he would try every area of life; intellectual pursuits, hedonistic pursuits, labor pursuits, every pursuit you can possibly imagine this man would try it. And his initial conclusion is stated there; this was an evil task that God had given to the sons of Adam to be occupied with. He means it was evil that God set in man this desire to find significance and meaning and happiness and yet man can't find it. And he's blaming God for it. In 1:14 he stated the results after looking at every area of life as vanity, just a chasing after the wind. In 1:15 he further found that man can't undo the effects of the Fall. And this is evident from the fact that there is a continual need to correct things or make them better, improve them. There is no end to the need to improve things, which just means that we can't fix the effects of the Fall. We try to limit the effects of the Fall, and this is good and well, but we can never correct everything. There is also some improvement that can be made. In 1:16-18 we have a section where Solomon re-stated vv 12-15 but with more details and we'll see him do this occasionally. In 1:16 he talked to himself, engaged in soliloquy with his soul, and arrogantly expressed the greatness of his wisdom over any other king in Jerusalem and how broad his experience was because he was able to observe the wisdom and knowledge of other great men who visited his court. And even with all of this he concluded that wisdom and knowledge were nothing but madness and folly, a striving after the wind. Even collective wisdom and knowledge, when multiple brilliant people are put together, amounts to nothing. In 1:18 he stated the reason why it was madness and folly; because the more human wisdom you have the more grief you encounter, and the more knowledge you have the more pain you realize. All that happens when you increase wisdom and knowledge is you increase contact with all the mess in this world and that leads to pain because there is so much evil in this world, and you can't do anything about it, or what you can do is so trivial in light of the whole that you hardly make a dent in it. And that was all Solomon's analysis from the flesh, it's a true reflection of the way the world looks at things, but we said this has to be corrected with Scripture because it's flawed. It doesn't consider how one might view these things when looked at from beyond the sun, that is, as having a purpose that is given by God.

We corrected two areas. First, we corrected Solomon's method or procedure. Solomon's method was to start with human experience and try to find meaning through his experience. This is a vain search. Experience and multiplying experience and even collective experience can never result in discovering ultimate meaning. Col 2:3 says that our method must be to start with divine revelation hidden in Christ. Divine revelation is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. All of life must be looked at through the lens of Scripture if we are going to make

sense of life and understand the meaning of it. So when it comes to experience, it is something that we all have, but it is not to govern our thinking and interpreting of the world around us. Divine revelation is the key, it should govern our thinking and it interprets our experience. It tells us what experiences are valid and what experiences are invalid. Experiences must be interpreted and it's divine revelation that is the key to interpreting them. So Solomon's problem here was with his method. He started in the wrong place, with experience. He should have started with divine revelation.

The second area we corrected was Solomon's conclusion. Solomon concluded that there is no ultimate solution to the fallen world. He said, "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted." He means the world is messed up and ultimately there seems to be no way to fix all the mess. We try but the mess just gets bigger. Every century of man has begun with an optimism that man will solve these problems. With the turn of the 20th century came the invention of the telephone and the automobile and the airplane and man thought that all this advance would alleviate his problems, but ultimately the 20th century became the bloodiest century ever, as man took those advances and used them for evil. The mess of this world can never be solved by man, that was Solomon's conclusion. How does the Scripture correct that? By Rev 21:1 and 4, where God says I will create all things new. The present heavens and earth will disappear and a new heaven and new earth will come, a heaven and earth where there is no suffering, no pain, no tears. So there is a solution. Solomon was just not able to see it because he was looking at things merely from the vantage point of life under the sun. And that's why some people have said that Ecclesiastes is the most pessimistic book in the Bible. But when we add the corrective and look at the same things Solomon looked at from the vantage point of life beyond the sun, we see that there is an optimism, and that is the real answer Solomon hopes we will come to see, that I did it the wrong way, but there is a right way. He wants to help us learn to live life beyond the sun.

Today we turn to Eccl 2. This is where Solomon begins to employ his method of investigating life under the sun. He declared his method, in 1:12, to be that of personal experiment. He's going to personally dive into all these things. 2:1 is where he takes his first plunge. **I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself."** Now this man was extremely wealthy, and people think that if they were wealthy then their lives would be perfect, they would have unlimited satisfaction and a life filled with happiness and meaning. Solomon decided to investigate this. He said **to himself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself."** The Hebrew word for **pleasure** is *simkha* and in this context refers to frivolous pleasure. Solomon is just going to spend his time spending lavish amounts of money to pursue things that don't really matter. It's just an attempt, the end of the verse says, to **enjoy** himself. And all that means is "have a good time!" Solomon's just going to have a good time. People are still running this experiment. Most of them are young people that don't have millions of dollars, but they want the lives of the rich and famous who have millions of dollars and so they mooch off of mom and dad as much as possible to live the party scene; do drugs, do alcohol, do sex, do whatever to bring them pleasure. And yet this has already been attempted by Solomon who had millions of dollars to spend on whatever pleasures he wanted and he gives his preliminary conclusion at the end of verse 1,

And behold, it too was futility. The word translated **futility** is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is the theme of the book. It's the same word translated "vanity" elsewhere. Of the 73x's uses in the OT, 38 are in this book. It's a book about vanity. And Solomon concluded that pleasuring yourself to death was just vanity. It lacked substance. It appears on the surface to hold promise for happiness, but in the end there's no happiness. Now why is this? Why is it that the person who builds his life around seeking pleasure is bound to be disappointed in the end? Warren Wiersbe gives three reasons; selfishness, the law of diminishing returns and only partial fulfillment. As for the selfishness of pleasure-seeking, he said, "For one thing, pleasure-seeking usually becomes a selfish endeavor; and selfishness destroys true joy. People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want, and they end up with broken relationships as well as empty hearts. *People are more important than things and thrills.* We are to be channels, not reservoirs; the greatest joy comes when we share God's pleasures with others." What he's getting at is that the more you seek pleasure and you try to fulfill it, the more selfish you become, because it doesn't satisfy. You just keep trying to get pleasure in more and more exotic ways. The reason for this endless search for satisfaction is the second reason, the law of diminishing returns. Here he said, "If you live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then you reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage. For example, the more that people drink, the less enjoyment they get out of it. This means they must have more drinks and stronger drinks in order to have pleasure; the sad result is desire without satisfaction. Instead of alcohol, substitute drugs, gambling, sex, money, fame, or any other pursuit, and the principle will hold true: when pleasure alone is the center of life, the result will ultimately be disappointment and emptiness."¹ This is the law of diminishing returns and that law just means that the experience of one thing brings happiness but the next time it doesn't so you have to do it in a more intense way in order to get the same pleasure you got before and the end of this is that you just end up being disappointed and empty. There is no end to trying to replicate experiences and it's just an endless cycle. You're never going to be satisfied. And the horrible thing about it is that you'll become a slave to whatever it is; whether it's alcohol or gambling or money or sex or drugs. You'll get to the point where it dominates your every thought and every desire and you can't stop trying to satisfy it. You become a slave. And the third reason pleasure-seeking will never satisfy is because it only partially fulfills. Wiersbe said, "There is a third reason why pleasure alone can never bring satisfaction: it appeals to only part of the person and ignores the total being. This is the major difference between shallow "entertainment" and true "enjoyment," for when the whole person is involved, there will be both enjoyment and enrichment. Entertainment has its place, but we must keep in mind that it only helps us to escape life temporarily. True pleasure not only brings delight, but it also builds character by enriching the total person."² So Solomon set out to pursue pleasure with all the pleasure money could buy and his initial conclusion was "it was vanity."

In verse 2 **I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"** When you live a frivolous life there is lots of cutting up and **laughter**. You mess around with each other and laugh and joke. While Solomon was engaging in this Keil and Delitzsch said, "...the feeling came over him that this was not the

way to true happiness, and he was compelled to say to laughter, It has become mad."³ You become nothing but a raving lunatic when you live this way. And he **said...of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?** Solomon wondered, what is this producing? The rhetorical question is supposed to be answered in the negative. It produces nothing. In fact, "instead of filling, it only enlarges the inner void."⁴ You just become more and more unsatisfied. That is exactly what most people find. They enter into this scene in high school and college and by the end of it all their supposed friends are gone and they're depressed and turning to alcohol and drugs to try to make themselves feel better. But they're just in bondage. There is nothing to fulfill their inner emptiness, they can only try to temporarily mask it.

From verse 2 to verse 3 there's a transition. His conclusion of verse 2 is that a full-scale plunge into sensual enjoyment proved fruitless, it didn't satisfy, so now when he comes to verse 3 and he says, **I explored with my mind**, it means he thought how he might contrive another experiment that might work. Here's what he came up with, **how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly**. So he entrained the use of **wine**, but he did not get intoxicated, because he wanted to see if he was able to control the **folly** rather than it control him. In other words, "He wished to have enjoyment, but in measure, without losing himself in enjoyment, and thereby destroying himself."⁵ He wanted to enjoy the pleasure of **wine** but without the consequences of drunkenness, and see if he could keep his wits about him and find satisfaction that way. And this experiment, he says, was to go on **until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives**. By **what good** Solomon means, what profit there is. He wants to see if a moderated form of alcohol or drug use would bring satisfaction to **the sons of Adam** as they live **under heaven**, that is under the sun, just life lived without God at the center. As J. Vernon McGee said, "Under the heaven"—remember that Solomon is a man probing and making experiments apart from God."⁶ Will alcohol and drug use under the guidance of wisdom at the center of life give the answer? Will that bring satisfaction for **the few years of their lives?** Man doesn't live very long. Solomon viewed man's longevity as very brief, a breath, if you will. And so this experiment was a moderated form of alcohol and drug use under the guiding light of the mind to see if this was profitable for men to pursue during their short life.

In 2:4 we learn that he engaged in other experiments to complement his search for pleasure. He put to use his wealth to surround himself with a luxurious lifestyle. He says, **I enlarged my works**. All these **works** are building projects. You can see, he says, **I built houses for myself**. What fun is life without multiple **houses?** According to 1 Kgs 7:1-12 Solomon built his own house which took all of 13 years to complete. He built "the house of the forest of Lebanon" which was 50 yards long, 25 yards wide and 10 yards high with everything artistically adorned. He constructed "the hall of the throne" for his judgment. He built a "house...for Pharaoh's daughter, whom" he "had married." And all of these houses were of the same materials and workmanship, so that no matter what home he was at, they all felt like home. Beyond these houses 1 Kgs 9:19 mentions other buildings built for pleasure in Jerusalem and Lebanon and throughout all the land under his rule, which must have amounted to dozens of houses. But more than just houses, Solomon says in verse 4, **I planted vineyards for**

myself. 1 Chron 27:27 mentions multiple **vineyards** that he had put under the charge of “Shimei the Ramathite” as well the resulting “wine cellars” that were put under the charge of “Zabdi the Shiphmite.” So houses and vineyards for his pleasure, but verse 5 says there was more.

I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. Solomon was obviously conversant in botany. He observed and studied closely plants and the natural world. He surrounded himself with them. These **gardens and parks** were royal **garden parks** lavishly adorned with the most beautiful plants and perfectly manicured. In these **garden parks** Solomon **planted...all kinds of fruit trees** so he could just walk through the shade of the park and pick the freshest of fruits for enjoyment. Song of Songs 6:11 mentions a garden park thought to be at Etam, south-west of Bethlehem, where he might go down “to the orchard of nut trees, to see the blossoms of the valley and whether the vine had budded or the pomegranates had bloomed.” And not only that but the fresh flowers and scents that filled the air of these parks (SoS 7:13). In Song of Songs 4:12ff we get an idea of what kinds of plants Solomon surrounded himself with when he likens Shulamith to an “orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants, Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, With all the trees of frankincense, Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.” Surely in all these, Solomon though, paradise was to be found.

But beyond his houses, his vineyards, wine cellars and garden parks, verse 6 says he constructed more pleasurable objects. **I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.** He constructed an irrigation system beginning with multiple **ponds of water** that flowed down into **a forest** of trees, probably including foreign trees that he had imported from around the world. The guy maxed out the credit card surrounding himself with any and everything that pleased the eye.

But he didn't stop there, verse 7, **I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves.** The **male and female slaves** were foreigners purchased to serve in the management of all of his possessions. 1 Kgs 5:14 mentions 70,000 transports and 80,000 hewers of stones for the work of the Temple, though what is referred to here are later slaves purchased for other projects. David had also purchased foreigners to serve in managing possessions, but Solomon went further. We're told here he also **had homeborn slaves.** These were Jews and they too were put into managing his affairs. He might have added that 1 Kings 5:13-18 mentions that he drafted 30,000 Jewish men to work on various projects, sending them to Lebanon for a month with two months at home. Because Solomon enslaved many of his own people, the people began to resent it. This is why when Solomon dies Rehoboam is faced with the elders' plea to lift the heavy burden Solomon had placed on them. The emphasis in verse 7 is on the mass of slaves that Solomon conscripted into laboring to support his lavish lifestyle.

Further, in verse 7b, he says, **Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.** In the ancient world cattle and flocks were the measure of wealth. Solomon is saying he was extremely wealthy, more so than anyone. He had large flocks of cattle and sheep, far **larger than all** the kings

who came before him **in Jerusalem**. If the sacrifices at the dedication of the Temple are any indication of the amount, the numbers were enormous. 1 Kgs 8:63 says they sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep.

Beyond this wealth verse 8 says, **Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces**. He had tons of money left over that he could stare at for hours on end. He was able to buy all his heart could conceive and still have **silver and gold** just sitting around. The word **collected** means to just keep around just for the sake of possession. He was collecting gold and silver as well as **the treasure of kings and provinces**. Various national treasures, pieces of art that he gathered as gifts from various **kings and provinces**. And we know these must have come from Tyre in the north, Ophir in the south, as well as Central Asia and Africa. Solomon had money and treasure flowing in from all over the world, too much to spend, so he collected it and put it on display. And this surely would bring pleasure to the eyes, simply gazing upon such a great accumulation.

And even more than all of this, verse 8b says **I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines**. Here Solomon added entertainment to the menu. One's eye is never satisfied without entertainment. **Male and female singers** to perform each evening; theatrical and lavish. And beyond that the greatest pleasures of men, that of **many concubines**. A **concubine** was not a wife so much as a mistress, sexually united to a man. We know from 1 Kgs 11:3 that Solomon had "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." In this period Solomon set his heart on pleasing himself with sexual love, the fairest and most pleasant of all earthly delights. And we are told that this is what turned his heart away after other gods. So, in fact, his entire escapade recounted in Ecclesiastes was thought of first in his mind when his many wives and concubines turned his heart away from whole devotion to the LORD God. And as such sex can be so appealing to the eye that it will destroy one's total devotion to the LORD. It did Solomon's.

So verses 3-8 are all that Solomon sought to please himself with while not losing himself in them, the drinking of wine, the building of houses, the garden parks and the ponds for irrigation; the planting of vineyards and fruit trees; the purchase of foreign slaves as well as the conscripting of Jewish slaves; the multiplying of cattle and sheep; the collecting of gold and precious silver and national treasures from other countries; the male and female entertainment and sexual delights.

In verse 9, **Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem**. Surrounded by all the luxuries of life Solomon concluded that he **became great**. He thought he was happy and more successful **than all who preceded him in Jerusalem**. And in all this he claims that his **wisdom also stood by him**, meaning he maintained his wisdom and skill in ruling the kingdom.

And therefore, in verse 10, **All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them, I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure**. The lust of the eyes he simply gave into. Whatever his **eyes** saw and **desired**, he indulged in. He did not resist temptation but wholly partook of it. Whatever his **heart** desired he simply enjoyed. And I do not

think that just because we are modern we have access to more than Solomon. J Vernon McGee said, "It is now known that snow was brought down from Mount Hermon so that he could have cold drinks in the summertime. I think Solomon tried everything that a man could try for pleasure."⁷ I think that is true and I do not think a man on earth has gone as far as Solomon. I do think there are men who have great resources, more than they could ever spend, but I do not think any of them had the creative genius of Solomon, so their attempts in the realm of pleasure would be less extensive and less penetrating than his.

In the latter part of the verse Solomon states his rationalization for not withholding his heart from any pleasure. **for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.** He viewed all of this as the rewards of his labor. He had built the houses and vineyards and royal garden parks and ponds and forests and what was the point if not to enjoy the fruits of the labor. Therefore, if his heart desired it it rightly belonged to him as the **reward for all his labor** and why deprive myself of such fruits. This, at least, was his justification for not refusing anything his eyes desired. In his mind he deserved to enjoy them. And we should point out that verse 10 does confirm that Solomon had **pleasure**. Solomon searched for **pleasure** and he found it and enjoyed it. There's no question about that, but the question is whether it fulfilled Solomon, whether it made him complete and satisfied. That was his goal as stated in verse 1 and verse 11 is his conclusion.

Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after the wind and there was no profit under the sun. Was Solomon fulfilled? No. He was not fulfilled. He was not happy. He got some pleasure from the building projects, the garden parks and the sex, but when all was said and done he was not fulfilled. Why? J Vernon McGee said, "Well, I don't know why, but they are not."⁸ I think Warren Wiersbe had better understanding. He said the reason is three-fold; first, pleasure-seeking leads to selfishness which deprives one from real joy; second, the law of diminishing returns means more intense experiences are required to get the same effect, which drives one to emptiness; and third, it is only partially fulfilling, it does not address the whole man, and therefore cannot fulfill man.

In conclusion, Solomon is the ultimate example of one who thought that if he could have all the luxuries of life set before him and all the things that the eyes crave laid before him on a silver platter then he could find happiness and fulfillment. But he could not. He had more money than he could spend and he was still unhappy. He was not unlike the countless celebrities and sports stars and businessmen that make millions and billions of dollars only to find themselves empty inside. Hollywood and the media would like you to think that you will really find happiness if you get the perfect life, but in reality that is nothing but a demonic lie. This has all been tried and found wanting. Solomon's lesson for us is this; you will not be happy if you are rich. You will not be happy if you have everything you ever wanted. You will only want more and you will only become selfish and self-absorbed and empty.

The NT has two correctives for this. We like to end on a note of optimism. So first, let us turn to Acts 20:33. In Paul's final word to the elders at Miletus he closes with this. "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Giving is where you will find true joy, not in owning everything on the block, not in having every item that your eye craves, but in giving there is true pleasure that trumps all earthly pleasures. Second, there is nothing wrong with having things or being rich, but only when God is at the center. Those things alone, when they become the center, they will destroy you. Many a man has been destroyed by money. That just means God is not at the center of the money. But if God is kept at the center then it will not destroy the man but simply be a means for that man to serve Him.

Let's conclude with a bit of sound wisdom from J Vernon McGee. "A great many people will not take Solomon's word for it; they have to make the same experiments—although not to the extent that Solomon did. Eventually they arrive at the same conclusion. They say, 'Life is empty.'"⁹ Put God at the center and life will not be empty, but full!

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 34–35.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 35.

³ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 667.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 668.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 669.

⁶ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Poetry (Ecclesiastes/Song of Solomon)*, electronic ed., vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 27.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Poetry (Ecclesiastes/Song of Solomon)*, electronic ed., vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 28.

⁸ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Poetry (Ecclesiastes/Song of Solomon)*, electronic ed., vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 28.

⁹ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: Poetry (Ecclesiastes/Song of Solomon)*, electronic ed., vol. 21 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 29.