

An Empty Life (3): The Emptiness of Hedonism

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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If you have your bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes. Before I read the text, I want to do two things: first, I want to outline the passage we will study, Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, and then I want to remind you of the big picture of the argument of the Preacher so far. Because expository preaching aims not only to faithfully what God is saying in His word, where He says it, how He says it, it also aims to help you be able to read the bible for yourself. This book can be somewhat confusing in outlining, so I believe that outlining the passage and then reminding ourselves of the argument so far will help us appreciate more what God is saying to us in His word.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, this passage outlines clearly into five parts. First, in verse 1, then the second part in end of verse 1 and all of verse 2. The third part is in verses 3-8, the fourth in verses 9-10, and the fifth part is in verse 11. The first part, in verse 1a, if you will, Solomon describes for you the quest he is going to go on. It is a quest for pleasure. He's searching for relief from the futility of life; he's searching for relief from the vanity and emptiness of life through pleasure, so he's telling you what his quest will be in this text. I need to pause here and say, "Maybe that's where some of you are today. You're looking for relief from the monotony of life, or from the insubstantial meaning of your life in pleasure. Well, if that's where you are today, Solomon knows exactly where you are, he's been there. God knows exactly where you are; He's written about it here in His word. So the first part is the quest, and second part, in the second half of verse 1 and in verse 2 is the conclusion. You'll see Solomon do this consistently. He introduces a new quest, and then gives you immediately the conclusion to the quest. In this case, the conclusion is failure. It doesn't work. Pleasure as the means, as the avenue for providing him a sense of satisfaction and meaning in life doesn't work. A realistic assessment of the quest, the search for, the project of pleasure, Solomon says here, is meaningless, it's useless. That's what he says.

Now, knowing that you are about to say, "Yes, Solomon you probably didn't do it right." He says, "Oh, well let me tell you how I did it." And that's the third part in verses 3-8. He actually catalogs for you the different ways in which he pursued pleasure. He gives you the avenues, inebriation, comedy; self motivated

architectural and agricultural projects, entertainment, money, servants, music, sex. He gives you a catalog of the ways that he pursued pleasure, and then just in case you're saying, "Yea, but you probably didn't get any satisfaction out of that," he then takes you to the fourth point, in verses 9-10, and he gives you an assessment of how he did. And here it is: "I did it better than any of all ya'll have ever done it." That's his assessment. His assessment is that nobody has ever had more fun than I have had. His assessment is, "Let me tell you what life was like doing it: it was great!" And then he draws his conclusion from it, and that's the fifth part, in verse 11. He gives the same conclusion he gave at the end of verse 1 and 2, and he says, "You know what — I sat down and I thought about it, and here's my verdict: vanity, emptiness, chasing the wind, profitless, utter failure." That's the outline of chapter 2:1-11. Happy Father's Day!

Now, let's remember the context in which this is done. So far, we have looked at the thesis of the book in chapter 1:1-11, and the first example argument is in 1:12-18. It's extended in this chapter in verse 12-17, but it starts in chapter 1. The thesis of the book is very clear. Here is Solomon's thesis: life is empty. That's Solomon's thesis. Now, that's not his final verdict on life. That's not the last word he has to say, he has a few more very important things to say, but he begins there: life is empty. That's how he states it, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And he states it that way not because that's his final verdict on life, but in order to shock those of us who are trying to live life apart from God into the reality of what we're doing, and into the reality of what we're doing to ourselves. He is saying that living life apart from God, living life without living trust in God, is meaningless; it's empty, it's vain. Life is empty. And so he says in verses 1-11, put in the context of that thesis, that life under the sun, and you remember that's his code word for talking about life lived apart from God, life under the sun is empty. It's meaningless, it's futile, in fact; it's a bad joke. That's what life apart from God is.

Now, he furthermore argues in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 that every human avenue to meaning and fulfillment apart from God fails. All substitutes for finding true enjoyment and meaningful well grounded satisfaction in life, other than God Himself, or apart from God, end up empty. Now, he knows that there will be many in his audience who say, "Oh come on, there are lots of ways you can find satisfaction in this life. There are lots of ways you can find meaning in this life." And then in much of the rest of this book, he begins to catalog different ways people try to do that. He begins with, you recall, wisdom. He says let's go the direction of being astute and reflective and wise and practical and knowing how things work and having knowledge that is able to be put to use and control and interpret the world around us. He says being wise and knowledgeable and savvy and smart and philosophically reflective and astute, surely that can provide meaning and satisfaction. And he explores that in the end of chapter 1 and also in chapter 2:12-17. Here's his verdict: it doesn't work. His verdict is that it is a failure, and in fact, he says that the wiser you are the more you will despair, apart from God. A wise man will reflect upon this world and grieve, because this is a world filled with hopelessness and grief and despair and self destructive

behavior. So, the wisest man will look at this world and he will be depressed.

Then, he says, if that does not work, and this is where we are in chapter 2 verses 12-17, if being wise, if wisdom leads you to grief and despair, why don't we try pleasure and laughter? We'll escape from the grief and despair of life by turning to pleasure and laughter. Maybe escape from grief via comedy and the satiation of the senses will suffice. That's the experiment he begins now. Needless to say, that is an experience many out there are trying, but some in here are trying. Let's hear what God has to say about it in His holy and inspired word. Ecclesiastes chapter 2 verse 1:

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"

I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had home-born slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men--many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. 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 wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, teach us from Your word. Shake us, wake us up, help us to see our own lives, and then show us the greatest good and the greatest pleasure; and then plant a desire for that in our hearts, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Pleasure seeking, as a way of satisfaction, fails because God has not built us to be satisfied that way. Pleasure seeking, as a way of finding some meaning in this sometimes life, fails because God has not built us to find meaning that way. Pleasure seeking cannot quench a man's spiritual thirst. But I'm ahead of myself. Let's follow the argument of Ecclesiastes. First, I want to walk through the Preacher's quest. We've already outlined it in five parts here in verse 1-11. Then,

I want to ask a question: what is the lie that pleasure coaxes us, entices us to believe? And then, what are the tricks and cheats that come along with that lie. Finally, I want to give the Bible solution to the matter of pleasure.

I. You cannot quench the thirst of life by drinking pleasure.

The quest to find meaning and satisfaction in life via pleasure. The Preacher's theme in verses 1-11 is that you cannot quench the thirst of this life by drinking pleasure. Since wisdom had failed to find meaning and satisfaction in life, the Preacher says, "OK, now I'll try pleasure." And let me say, more people try that avenue than try the avenue of wisdom. We sometimes look at the world and wish that a few more would try the avenue of wisdom. But more folks try the avenue of pleasure than try the avenue of wisdom. You don't have to think as much, for one thing.

We hear about it in the songs that we listen to and sing all the time. Here's one from one of my favorite groups. Now, young people, you've never heard of this group, OK? The last time that they did a real honest-to-goodness new album was who knows how long ago? Earth, Wind and Fire. If you listen to Earth, Wind and Fire songs, you'll find they all have one thing in common in them—they're all happy. Everything always works out fine. You've got to have a positive attitude and everything is going to work out fine. By the way, Earth, Wind and Fire brought *New Age* into our sort of cultural mix before *New Age* was cool. And here's an example, their song "System of Survival." Some of you can remember dancing to "System of Survival." Here goes.

The human race is running over me
I punch a clock at nine and five
I'm just trying to make a living.
A plastic face on satellite TV says,
"Life is filled with give-and-take."
He's takin' and I'm givin'
So, I dance
It's my system of survival—dancing
My system of survival
At times, it's the only way I'm going
to make it through the day.

Now look, I know that when you read that it sounds really goofy, but when they're singing it, it sounds pretty cool. But that's the way it is. When you read it, you think about it and it's pretty vacuous and so it is. But my friends, there are all sorts of people right around you who are trying to do just that. Where did the whole TGIF thing come from? Right there. Hard life, so let's party as quick and as fast as we can. "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." "No, I'm living for the weekend." Once again we have a new avenue of exploration here for the quest of meaning

and satisfaction; it's to drown the hard facts of life in frivolity.

Hedonism is the pursuit of or devotion to pleasure, especially to the pleasures of the senses. The thesis that pleasure is the highest good, that only pleasure has value in itself. And the Preacher rates this quest a failure. Look at verses 1 and 2. He rates the quest a failure. "I said to myself, "Come now, I'll test myself with pleasure. See, enjoy yourself." Behold, it too, was futility. I said of laughter, "It's madness." Of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" In other words, here's his final conclusion. You go this direction and what do you have? Futility, madness, uselessness—that's his own conclusion and that is not his conclusion because he failed to achieve pleasure. This is not a man who has been frustrated in a quest for pleasure. Let me emphasize that. This is not a guy who said, "I'm trying to get pleasure and I can't get no satisfaction." This is a guy who said, "I've had satisfaction galore!" And it's empty; it's meaningless and vain. From the fullness of his own realness of pleasure he says it failed to give any meaning to my life.

And just in case you're thinking, "Well, you really hadn't experienced some things I've experienced he says, "Let me just catalog a few things." And he catalogs some of the avenues that he pursued for pleasure. Stimulants, projects, people, money, things, music, sex. Look at six of them that he outlines for you in verses 3-8.

First of all, there's the pleasure of inebriation. I'll just anesthetize myself to the world. He says, "Wine." We've got a few more things to do that with today. We can do drugs and other things too, but it's basically the same thing; he's going to inebriate himself. He's going to see if that brings about satisfaction.

Then there's the pleasure of products, of projects. He built houses for himself, planted vineyards for himself, made gardens and parks for himself, fruit trees for himself, ponds for himself. Did you notice in verses 4-6 "for myself" repeated five times? This guy is not doing this for great and grandiose motives of helping the community; he just comes out and tells you, "I did these for *me*." For personal gratification.

Then, he says, "I sought the pleasure of attendants. I went out and bought people to serve me, hand and foot, day and night." Do you remember the long election of 2000, and when it was finally announced that George W. Bush had won, a newscaster commenting as he got into a limousine, assisted by the Secret Service, that "he would never ever again open a car door for himself?" Now, that's a little bit of an overstatement, because G.W.B. loves to get in his pickup truck and drive around the ranch, so I'm sure he opens his own car door. But the point is this: here's a man who's going to be waited on hand and foot for the rest of his life. And the Preacher is saying, "I had that, I bought people, so they would wait on me hand and foot."

And then he talks about the pleasure of money and possessions, "I had flocks

and herds greater than any body before me, I had silver, gold, the treasure of kings and provinces, I had the net worth of provinces.” Not really rich people, but provinces. I had the gross-domestic product of provinces.

He sought the pleasure of music, he had singers imported; and he sought the pleasure of sex, and boy did he ever get it. How many concubines? Seven hundred or so? Do you remember Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*? This was one of the reasons that Jim couldn't believe the Bible, because the Bible said that Solomon was the wisest man in the world and he had 700 wives. Jim never could see how those two things went together! But when it came to sexual satisfaction, he had it. He had sex slaves, on the call. And he does it all for himself, and his assessment? “I've done more than anybody.”

His assessment in verses 9 and 10 is “You will never have the kind of fun that I had. You don't have the resources to have the kind of fun that I had.” And what was the yield of it? He tells you in verse 11: the yield was “0” null set, the yield was vanity, the yield was like chasing the wind, the yield was no benefit. Why? Because pleasure pursued and even achieved, get this, it's not pleasure pursued and not gotten, but pleasure pursued and even achieved, apart from the base of a relationship with God and the ultimate pursuit of God, cannot fulfill.

Before we go on, let me pause and ask you this: what does your pursuit of pleasure tell about you? I'm going to argue that the pursuit of pleasure is not wrong in and of itself. There's a way to do it right, and a way to do it wrong, but what does your pursuit of pleasure tell about you? Is your pursuit of pleasure an alternative to the pleasures of God? Or, does it flow out of a profound contentment in the pleasures of God?

Now, you may be asking, “Well, how would I tell the difference between those things?” It's pretty easy. Does your leisure time, your vacation time, have God in it? Or, is God absent from your leisure time, your entertainment time, your vacation time? Are the things you're doing in your pursuit of pleasure something that you would God hanging around for? Why do you pursue your pleasure? Are you trying to kill some pain from the past? Is there some sense of lack that's driving your pursuit of pleasure? How about your entertainment? What's it like? Is it entertainment that you could bring Jesus along to? The first thing is the quest, and the quest, Solomon says, is a failure. You seek meaning and satisfaction in this life via pleasure, and it's a failure. That leads us to the issue of how pleasure ropes us in.

II. You must think hard about what the world is promising you in its pledge of pleasure.

What is the lie of pleasure? Now only what is the lie of pleasure, but what are the tricks that come along with the lie of pleasure, and how does pleasure cheat

you? In other words, I'm inviting you all to think hard about what the world is promising you in its pledge of pleasure, and we're told by sociologists that about 20,000 times a day you are hit with an image or idea promising you pleasure in this world, whether through print media, through radio or television or internet. You're being promised 20,000 times a day, by this world, that it can provide you pleasure and satisfaction.

Well, what's the lie? The lie is this: that earthly pleasure can provide you with true satisfaction; you just need to give it a chance. That's what every commercial marketing venture is telling you. "Just give it a chance, it will work. You're not happy? You haven't given it a chance. It will make you happy. Just do "x," or just buy "y," or just go "z." It will give you satisfaction and pleasure.

And what are the tricks that come along with that lie? When pleasure fails to satisfy, the world then says, "No, if you can only get the right thing, you'll be satisfied. You just haven't found the right thing. It's the next thing, that's what will do it." And so you go on this hunt from place to place, to find the next thing, because in the next thing you'll be satisfied. Men, dads, on Father's Day, that's how men get hooked on pornography. There's one thing, and I'll really get the high on the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing, and on the next thing, and then you don't know where it goes. And you're hooked. The other trick the world plays is, "You're not satisfied yet? It's because you don't have enough of what you want. You just need more. More will do it. Just add more. Your buddy over there, he has more. He's happy. If you had more, you'd be happy, too."

Then, of course, there are those folks who are pretty satisfied with the pleasures they're having. And they're not frustrated about the pleasures of life; they've having a boat load of it. And frankly, they're not thinking about it very much. What trick does pleasure play in this situation? "Look, stop thinking about all of this stuff, just enjoy it." Most people who go the avenue of pleasure are not sitting around smoking a pipe thinking about the philosophy of pleasure at night. They're just enjoying it. And that kind of shallowness about life anesthetizes us from reality.

Then there are the cheats of pleasure. There's the law of unfulfilled expectations. You thought that getting the next thing would do it. You thought that getting more would do it, and then it didn't, and then where do you go? You see, Solomon is saying, "Don't think that the next thing will do it; don't think that the more will do it, because I had the next thing and I had the more, and it didn't do it."

And there's the law of diminishing returns. And there are some—they got it and they liked it and then they got bored with it. It kind of didn't do the same thing for them three years later; it was boring. And the thing that you once craved and delighted in becomes boring.

And then there's the law of unintended consequences. You're pursuing the

pleasure, but along with that pleasure came something that you thought never ever would happen. "I didn't realize that pursuit of pleasure would cost me my family, my children. I didn't know that that pursuit of pleasure would cost me my church, my job, my community." Pleasure is a liar and a trickster and a cheat.

And young people, if you are going the way of pleasure, the reason you're going the way of pleasure is because there's something that's not filled up in you. And the pleasure is not going to fill it up and you're just going to become emptier and emptier because you're trying to fill yourself up on nothing. And if you're pursuing an affair, it is not going to fill you up. You're going to get emptier and emptier. Self, you see, cannot bear the weight of reality, and therefore, self-pleasing cannot bear the weight of reality. By that, I mean that centering the universe on yourself cannot provide meaning to that universe. You can't hold up the universe. You try and hold up this world on the back of yourself as the center, the basis, the foundation of everything, and you won't shrug with atlas; you'll get crushed. Only God can hold up the universe. Only God can give meaning to the universe. Self can't provide the meaning for the universe, and therefore, pleasing the self can't provide meaning and satisfaction in this world. I know that pleasure seekers are not self consciously philosophical about the meaning of life, and are not always aware of it, but they are on a quest for meaning. Young people, if you're getting drunk, there's something that's missing inside you that you're trying to fill up, and beer is not going to do it. Let me just tell you ahead of time. You need to think hard about what the world is promising in its pledge of pleasure.

III. The only pleasure that can ultimately fulfill us is pleasure in God.

So what is the Christian response to this? What's the Bible's solution to the emptiness of a life of pleasure seeking? Well, it is enjoying God. The only pleasure that can ultimately fulfill us is pleasure in God. The problem with the pursuit of pleasure is not that pleasure in itself is wrong though there are some pleasures that are wrong. The fundamental problem is seeking pleasure as a substitute for God; seeking ultimate pleasure in the wrong way.

And so, the Christian solution, the Bible solution to hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure is not to renounce pleasure, but to seek pleasure in God. Hear that loud and clear. The world thinks that the Christian agenda is to make you as miserable as possible. And look, it does that because the world hears us say things like: die to yourself, deny yourself, take up your cross, die daily, consecrate yourself, give yourself away to God, climb up on the altar and be a living sacrifice to God. And the world says, "That does *not* sound like fun." And look, the world is half right. Usually, when you do those things; it is not fun.

But understand that Jesus says two things. "When you die to yourself, you find new life in Me." The message of the Bible is: those who die to self find pleasures forevermore--pleasures deeper, more satisfying, more lasting, and more glorious

than the pleasures of this world. Why do we sing in “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”? *Fading is the world-lings pleasures, all its boasted pomp and show; solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know.* Because true pleasure is only found in God, and God is only found when we die to self, give ourselves away and live to Him in faith.

Why does Eric Liddell say to sister Jenny, “God made me fast and when I run, I feel His pleasure.” Because he did what he was doing out of a relationship with the living God. And what made him delight was not just the running and not just being fast, but in glorifying and enjoying God in running and in being fast.

Meaning is not found in the self-gratifying pursuit of earthly pleasure, but true pleasure is found in God. And so the Christian says to the pleasure seeker, “Your problem is not that you want too much; it's that you're satisfied with too little. You'll take trinkets when God is offering you mounds of gold. The filet mignon dinner has been set before you, and you say, “No thanks, I'd like to go to McDonald's.” You are rejecting real, profound, lasting pleasure for fake pleasure, for transient pleasure. We must aim for the pleasures of God and delight in His delighting in His own glory.

And one grand part of that delighting of God in His own glory is His gracious choice of us, as His own inheritance, and His promise to us to grant to us pleasures forevermore, in Him. And so Solomon says, “You want to live life under the sun, and you want to find meaning through the pursuit of pleasure? You'll never find it. Nobody,” he says, “could have had more fun, more laughter, more pleasure, more sensual fulfillment than me—nobody. And it didn't work.” So here's the trick. You can't find true pleasure under the sun; you can only find it *in* the Son. Let's pray.

Lord, take our lives; enable us to die to ourselves, and then grant us the pleasures of God. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Worship of God

“*Who we worship* determines what we become, and *how we worship* – to a large extent – determines who we worship.”

The Reading of Scripture

Paul told Timothy “give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13) and so, at virtually every morning service, a minister reads a substantial section of Scripture. The public reading of the Bible has been at the heart of the

worship of God since Old Testament times. In the reading of God's word, He speaks most directly to His people. We generally read consecutively through Bible books. If the sermon is based on the New Testament, we usually choose the reading from the Old, and *vice versa*. We are reading through the Book of Acts on Sunday mornings.

The Sermon

We are working our way through Ecclesiastes on summer Sunday mornings. Today we consider the attempt to supply meaning to life via pleasure and possessions.

The Psalms and Hymns

O Worship the King (Psalm 104)

Our sung response to God's call is based on a psalm of praise. Though most of our congregation will recognize it as one of their favorite "hymns," it is, in fact, a Robert Grant paraphrase of a portion of Psalm 104. Grant was a member of the British Parliament and an evangelical Anglican from Aberdeen, Scotland. This hymn was written the year before he was appointed Governor of Bombay. The Book of Psalms is God's divinely inspired hymnbook, thus we always sing psalms along with scripturally sound hymns in all our services.

From All That Dwell below the Skies (Psalm 117)

In 1719, Isaac Watts produced his *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. This setting of Psalm 117 was part of that collection. We sing it to the familiar tune "Duke Street." The hymn has a wonderful "missiological bent" to it, calling on everyone, in every land and every tongue, to praise the one true God. This song is, thus, a suitable response to the morning Scripture reading which emphasizes the Gospel going to the Gentiles.

When All Your Mercies, O My God

This great hymn was written by Joseph Addison, son of Lancelot Addison, who served as Dean of Lichfield Cathedral. Joseph attended the Charterhouse and Magdalene College, Oxford (BA 1691, MA 1693). Although intended for the Church, he studied law and politics, and soon attained, through powerful influence, some important posts. He was successively a Commissioner of Appeals, Under Secretary of State, Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and Chief Secretary for Ireland. He married the Dowager Countess of Warwick in 1716. Addison is best known for his contributions to the newspapers *The Spectator* (where his hymns appeared), *The Tatler*, *The Guardian*, and *The Freeholder*. He also wrote the tragedy *Cato*.

Take My Life, and Let It Be

We'll sing this great hymn in response to the morning message. "Take my life" was Frances Ridley Havergal's "consecration hymn," as she herself called it. "Only a person as totally dedicated to God as she was had the right to pen such lines or invite others to sing them. We know from one of her letters just when and how the hymn was written. The date was February 4, 1874; the occasion was the end of a five days' visit to the house of some friends. She had prayed that God would so use her visit that all ten members of the household might become genuine, rejoicing Christians; and he answered her prayer. 'Before I left the house everyone had got a blessing. The last night of my visit, after I had retired, the governess asked me to go to the two daughters. They were crying, etc.; then and there both of them trusted and rejoiced; it was nearly midnight. I was too happy to sleep, and spent most of the night in praise and renewal of my own consecration; and these little couplets formed themselves, and chimed in my heart one after another, till they finished with *Ever, ONLY, ALL* for thee!"

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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