

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 2

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We come this evening, at the beginning of Ecclesiastes 2, to the single clearly autobiographical passage in the book. Throughout the book Solomon is speaking from his own experience and observations, but here we can clearly link up what he tells us to what we know of his life from the books of Kings and Chronicles. The fact that Solomon HIMSELF is on a quest is something we can't forget. He wants to come to grips with the bent world as it really is, and the almost insurmountable obstacles it confronts man and his labor with. This is why the book has a sort of roiling, turbulent, unsettling quality.

We don't have here the wise-king of Proverbs, sitting back and dispensing wisdom. We have that same figure in the agonizing and dark and inscrutable depths of his soul wrestling with his existence. And this means there ARE things in Ecclesiastes which are, to indulge in a gross understatement, enigmatic. Solomon DOES appear cynical at times, he DOES seem to exaggerate, he surely APPEARS to contradict himself on more than one occasion. And there ARE times when we are just not sure WHAT he means. Yet, this is not a deficiency. It opens up gaps, spaces, for us to wrestle honestly with the mysteries of life. And, the beauty of this is that it is exactly how anyone who has been struck by the grandeur and misery of things, feels. This is how we talk to ourselves.

One day the world seems absurd and stone-cold, gray, the next day it's brimming with hope and possibility. We tell ourselves something, then we tell ourselves not to listen to what we just told ourselves. Yeats: quarrel w/ others rhetoric, quarrel w/ ourselves, poetry. Quarrel with self is more interesting. All that to say, this is intensely personal.

In v.1 Solomon says: I said in my heart – there you see the inner dialogue – come now, I will test you with pleasure. Now this passage is almost universally taken to be about Solomon's pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. He goes on a spree of self-indulgence and concludes, with Mick Jagger, that he can't get no satisfaction.

I do not think that is correct, or, it is at best, only partially true, and we will see why as we proceed. The first thing to note is that the word for pleasure here means simply joy or delight. And it is translated as such at other places in the

book. It does not *necessarily* have any sinful overtones. Solomon is going to test his soul with pleasure or joy or delight. He says to himself: enjoy yourself. And there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, Solomon will commend it later in the book.

When he says he will TEST himself. He means he will engage the pursuit of joy with gusto. When it comes to pleasure, Solomon is a Baptist. He believes in full immersion. As is often the case in Ecclesiastes, we get the conclusion first, at the end of v.1. But this also was vanity. Joy, delight, pleasure, they were all vapor.

The up-front conclusion continues in v.2: I said of laughter, it is mad. Not exactly an endorsement for the Comedy channel. Laughter here means a kind of joking frivolity. But Solomon is not amused. In the face one's vaporizing existence in a twisted world, much that passes for humor is insane, its madness. Is there anything more pathetic than the humor of virtually all the stand-up comics in the world? They refuse to plum the bottom of the human condition; they refuse to see the lack of leverage, the fleeting, vaporizing quality, in even their humor. Cover it up with all the moronic laugh tracks you'd like – it doesn't change anything. The dust and bones factory grinds on.

Christian theologian, David Bentley Hart's offers this vision true humor: Christianity, seeing all things from the perspective of the incarnation is the most comic vision of things: it encompasses the greatest contradictions and tragedies of all, but does so in such a way as to take the suffering of existence into the unanticipated absurdity of redemption. Which yields the somewhat gratifying conclusion that, to be both a lover of wisdom and an accomplished humorist one must almost certainly be a Christian.

I can't unpack all this here but the bottom line is this: You want to tell good jokes: you need to get to grips with suffering and all the absurd contradictions of life under the sun. And to do that seriously you need the incarnation and cross, what Hart calls the unanticipated absurdity (surprise) of redemption.

Even here, though, when humor is done right, Solomon would say its still vapor. Recall, he thinks EVERYTHING is vapor. There is sinful vapor, and there is good, Christian vapor. EVERYTHING is vapor, but not all vapor is equal. As it is with laughter, so it is with pleasure (or joy or delight, remember it's the same word). I said of pleasure, v.2, what use is it? The key word is USE. What does it ACCOMPLISH? What gain or leverage against the horizon of death does joy or pleasure bring? This is the driving question. Solomon thinks, rightly, zero. Those are his conclusions on laughter and joy.

He describes his quest in more detail beginning in v. 3. I searched my heart how to cheer my body with wine. This is where many concludes that Solomon is descending into an "everybody must get stoned" approach to life. As if he, and his frat-boy friends, are going to have a drinking party.

But there are some serious qualifications we must make. And it's as if Solomon is aware that he needs to tell us to be careful, because the very next thing he says is "my heart still guiding me with wisdom." This is not abandonment to a dissolute lifestyle. Wine is a good thing. It's a sign of the kingdom. Psalm 104 says it is given to make the heart of man glad. But it is also clear that Solomon is experimenting with it a bit because he says, in the next phrase, he sought how to lay hold of folly. It's as if he said, I will see what wine can do for me, but I will evaluate it with my wisdom. Wisdom remains. He is not seeking to see if he can find meaning through an altered state of consciousness. He says he played around with wine till I might see what was GOOD – Solomon is trying to seek out what is GOOD. Maybe wine will give him some leverage over the world. (Prov 30) Maybe it is how the children of man should spend what he calls, at the end of v.3, the few days of life they have under the sun.

So, there may be and probably is SOME excess here, but not without wisdom guiding and evaluating the results. The reason we cannot, I believe, see Solomon as a simple hedonist in this passage is that almost everything he now mentions is lawful. Not only is it lawful, but, at least at the beginning of his reign, it was the result of God's blessing on him. Solomon's wisdom and wealth (which we are about to look at) are spoken of in 1 Kings 4 as God's blessing.

Verse 4: I made great works. Various public and private works projects. I built houses, plural. Solomon's various building projects are described in Kings and Chronicles. I planted vineyards for myself. The wine had to come from somewhere. There is nothing sinful about building projects and vineyards. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself, v.6, pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. Again, this is stuff that Solomon did in faithfulness to God, at least at the beginning of his reign. And this is not some low-brow lifestyle. This is a sophisticated, wide-ranging, culturally informed man.

Verse 7: I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. These would be the children of the original servant-slaves. He continues in the middle of v.7: I had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. This was all the blessing of God. 1 Kings 4 tells us:

Solomon's provision (meaning his royal households provision) for ONE DAY was thirty cors of fine flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl. Scholars estimate it would take thousands of people to eat this much food daily. This is fine cuisine, made by the finest chefs. (In volume)

In v.8 we read: I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. The treasure of kings would refer to the tribute paid him by

surrounding nations. The provinces would refer to tax revenue from Israel. He was so rich that 1 Kings 10 tells us that in his day silver was as common as any other stone. Again, this wealth was acquired under the blessing of God. There is nothing unlawful in it.

In the middle of v.8 he says: I got singers, both men and women. And you can bet they sounded good. He's not hiring out your local grunge band. These are paid professionals. So there is architecture, and horticulture, and animal husbandry and music. And, in addition to the singers, verse 8 tells us he had many concubines. This may be the first clear sign of unlawful behavior. But even here some caution is needed. Any good translation will tell you (in the margin) that we don't really know what the Hebrew means here. But let's assume its concubines. That seems to fit the context. He calls them the delight of the sons of man. We know that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. And it is here that he begins to turn away from the Lord.

So what we have here is a God-blessed monarch enjoying many things lawfully, but also over-indulging at points. It a world of wine, women and song. Maybe a bit too much wine, and certainly a few too many women. But that should not blind us to the fact that most of the passage is free of any overtly sinful pursuit. Solomon begins to summarize this part of his quest for gain in v.9: So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Great, means great in wealth and riches and accomplishments. This is not boasting. It is a simple matter of fact. And Solomon will not let us write this passage off to pure excess. He says, for the second time in this text, in v.9: Also my wisdom remained with me. Even where there was excess, I still can evaluate it wisely.

Verse 10 is quite important to see what is going on: And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. This does not, I know I'm beating a dead horse, but this statement does not mean he lived a lawless life. At least in the main. I kept my heart from no pleasure. Again, this is equivalent to "I kept my heart from no joy or delight." He didn't need to; virtually all he had was from the Lord's bounty.

The next phrase in v.10 is crucial: for my heart found pleasure (or joy) in all my toil. Notice carefully, he sought pleasure (or joy) and he FOUND it. He doesn't say "ah, there was no joy in any of it." He says the opposite. He FOUND joy. In fact, he puts the focus on the lawful nature of his joy. He says at the end of v.10: this was my reward for all my TOIL. The joy was from the toil. He labored with God-given wisdom, and it was enjoyable. Folks who read this passage and say "Solomon had it all, but none of it brought any satisfaction," are not reading v.10 very closely. He found joy and it was his reward for all the works he outlines here. This is important. The man of the world does find some joy, some delight; some pleasure in his various pursuits. To read Solomon as saying otherwise would be to falsify the experience of the great majority of mankind. They labor and they taste joy and delight.

After v.10, v. 11 comes as a surprise: Then, when all was said and done, I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. Here all of the Preachers key terms are used: vanity or vapor, striving after or shepherding the wind, and no gain under the sun. What can this mean in light of the pronouncement that he found joy in his toil? Here we are at the heart of the enigma of the book. Let me summarize it under three points.

First, vapor. Vapor means, as we have seen, fleeting, transient mist. So Solomon has a glass of wine. It brings some joy. Some delightful relief from life's hardship. But, once the last sip is gone, the joy is gone. You need another glass. Then, eventually, you need a couple of aspirin. The joy was there, but it's gone the minute the glass is empty. Same thing, as we saw earlier, with laughter. A split second of joy, then gone – into the midst. Same thing with food. You taste it for a second, then you need another forkful. The meal is over and you need an antacid. It was wonderful. But it was a vapor. You listen to some fine music and the second it hits your eardrum it vanishes. Vapor.

Solomon has sex with one, or maybe thee, of his concubines, and when it's over he wonders which concubine is next. Maybe a Phoenician, or a Babylonian, or an African. It's not that it's not enjoyable; it's that you can't hold the joy. It all slips off into the midst. You end up like Hemmingway, the inveterate womanizer, with a shotgun in your mouth. You can only live in one house, walk through one garden; enjoy one fruit tree at a time. And the joy they give comes, and then it goes.

The second point is shepherding the wind. You can't grasp or control any of these things. You can't manage them or prolong them. In fact, when you try to grasp and control these things, they turn on you. Alcohol, food, sex, all become obsessions which originally brought some delight and joy, but end up controlling and ruining lives. All the things Solomon enjoyed are good in themselves, but the irony of life in a twisted world is that, it is the good stuff that ends up killing you.

In fact, we have some subtle hints that THIS was part of Solomon's problem. He tried to grasp these things. To control them. He tried, like Adam and Eve in the garden, control them and the reverse happened. By the end of his life some of them were controlling him. The language in vv. 4-6 evokes the Garden of Eden. You have planting and vineyards, precious metals, and gardens and fruit trees, and water flowing into this paradise. Solomon, the type of Christ, has recreated an Eden. But he finds, like Adam and Eve, he must receive and not grasp. Grasp at wine, or food, or music or sex or aesthetic pleasure and you end up shepherding the wind.

Finally, the third point is gain. None of these things, good in themselves, bringers of fleeting, yet ungraspable, joy, give one any leverage in the face of death. In

the face of the cycles of nature and history which overtake us all. There is no GAIN or advantage to them in the face of man's plight.

So we are here at the heart of the book. The heart of Solomon's wisdom, which he will make explicit later in this chapter. Enjoy the good things of life. They are truly good. They can bring you joy and delight. But you must receive them from the hand of God in a full and sober realization of what life is like in a fallen world. The pleasure in life is vapor, don't expect it to last. The delight in life is the gift of God, don't try and grasp and control it. There is no leverage against the horizon of death and the crooked nature of the world. Don't seek any. Stop with the manipulation and the insistence on control. Cease striving to get to some place where you are in control. Its vanity. Face up to the way things are. Then give thanks. Every good and perfect gift is from above. Receive them with open hands; then let them go. There are more to come. For in the Lord's presence is fullness of joy, at His right hand there are pleasures FOREVEMORE.

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