

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 4

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Well, I promised that this is a book about joy. But it's certainly not clear up to this point how that could even be possible. Yet, when we come to the end of chapter 2, we are, to borrow from C.S. Lewis' book title, Surprised by Joy. And what a pleasant surprise it is! It's been a long time coming, I know. But hopefully, there will be a sweetness in what we find here, that we would not have been able to savor, had we not been along on Solomon's grim journey.

This text, chapter 2, verses 24 through 26, is the first of five Carpe Deum passages in Ecclesiastes. Carpe Deum means, of course, seize the day. And we have here a robust affirmation of life. A call to enjoyment of the basic simple goods of life as gifts from the hand of God.

Now this text is so startling that many commentators do not know what to do with it. Some say, Solomon is simply incoherent. There is no way to square what he says here with what he has said up to this point. Others say that this passage is one of resignation. Solomon, is moping, sort of like Winnie-the-Pooh's eeyore, saying: well, I guess the best we can do in this meaningless life is to try and have a little fun. Still, others say that we have a full-orbed endorsement of hedonism: eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow, as Solomon has repeatedly told us, we die.

None of these options will work. The passage is a completely positive, sincere affirmation of life. It is in full accord with the Hebrew perspective enshrined in the rest of the OT. And, as I hope to show, it is not very hard to square this with all that Solomon has said to this point. So, let's look at v.24: There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. Not only can the basic goods of life, eating, drinking and labor, be enjoyed – there is NOTHING BETTER than this.

Solomon always seems to be overreaching. Exaggerating. And here he seems to swing from one extreme to the other. But, we have seen, I trust, that he was NOT exaggerating when he said ALL is vapor. And, he is not exaggerating here. There is NOTHING BETTER than eating, drinking and enjoying one's work? Yes, there is NOTHING BETTER than these things. Let's explore this a little.

First, his reflects a Hebraic (and Biblical) mindset which does not split the world into secular and sacred, spiritual and physical, earthly and heavenly. Life is a

seamless whole and nearly the whole substance of it consists in eating, drinking and laboring in your vocation. So, Solomon doesn't say there is NOTHING BETTER than a life of prayer, or full-time Christian service, or evangelism or Bible study. If you can't enjoy eating and drinking and toiling, you are not going to have much joy elsewhere. If you can enjoy these things, you will enjoy life in this fallen world just fine.

Second, we have to remember Solomon's concern here is with what GAIN a man can have in his toil? But this is not an idiosyncrasy of Ecclesiastes. It goes back to Genesis and the fall of man. Man is cursed and driven from Eden and given a grievous task under the sun. Here he asserts there is NOTHING BETTER than enjoying your labor in THIS twisted world. How this can be so brings us to our third point.

Third, when Solomon refers to eating and drinking here, he doesn't mean just the bare acts of consuming solids and liquids. Like labor, eating and drinking are major THEOLOGICAL themes from one end of the Bible to the other. Man is driven from Eden because of a food violation. He EATS improperly. He grasps from the wrong tree. He tries to leverage and control, and manipulate the given world and now we are all left grasping and shepherding the wind.

Food, which was to be for man's life, is now bound up with death. You're dying so you need to eat. But the food you eat is also dead and dying. Your refrigerator is a food-tomb. Everything in it is cut off from its life source. Better keep it cold – it's a food morgue. Dying people now eat dying food. And guess what? They keep on slowly dying so, to forestall the process, you need to eat again and again and again. The Torah is full of food laws. The sacrifices culminate in a meal in Yahweh's presence.

Finally, Jesus comes eating and drinking. This doesn't mean: wow, look he actually swallows and chews! It means he came, man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, he came enjoying and affirming life. He literally, as one scholar put it, eats his way through the gospels. Meal after meal full of significance foretastes of the Kingdom of God. Then, what does he do at the end of his life? How does he want us to remember him? By the Supper. He leaves us a meal. A meal which anticipates the new heavens and new earth where many will come from the east and west and recline AT TABLE with A, I, J. Where we all feast at the wedding supper of the lamb. The coming kingdom is depicted as a celebratory meal.

So let us not splice and dice the world up into secular and sacred, into spiritual and not so spiritual activity. Nothing is more important than how you eat and drink. And there is NOTHING BETTER than enjoying eating and drinking. Solomon is affirming an approach to life here. One of contentment, one of gratitude and receptivity. And he can do this because of what he says at the end of v.24: this also, I saw is from the hand of God. This enjoyment cannot be grasped or managed or turned into personal gain. It is the gift of God's kindness.

It's not simply that life is a gift, though that is true. Solomon's point here is that enjoyment in the things of life is a gift.

There is nothing inherent in man that enables him to enjoy life. In fact, given the grievous business, the opposite is more likely to be true. Many have all the food, drink and economic bounty one could ask for without any joy. The outcome of joy is not guaranteed. It comes from the hand of God. And it doesn't require that you be wealthy or have an abundance. In chapter 4:6 he says: better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after wind. Same sentiment is expressed in Proverbs: better is a little where righteousness is, than a houseful of feasting with strife. And it doesn't depend on your specific vocation. In the New Testament we have numerous exhortations to live in quietly with godliness and dignity, to mind our affairs, to work with our hands. To labor so we can help others. To do whatever work we've been given as unto the Lord.

There is NOTHING BETTER than this, because it is a sign of the day when the curse will be lifted and man will be restored to full dominion in the earth. It too is the gift of God. Solomon enlarges on this some in v.25: for apart from Him (that is, God) who can eat or who can have enjoyment? Of course, by eat, he means partake of life in the holistic, biblically prosperous way we have been discussing. It's not that men don't have some fleeting pleasure or joy in life. Solomon said he had some himself from his pursuit of his various activities in chapter 2. It's that they can't have joy in the sense described here. Men try and grasp and manage and leverage their pleasures in such a way as to get some GAIN out of them. But that is vanity. It ends in despair.

I don't know if you've ever noticed men and women of the world, sophisticated folks with a zest for life, when they reach the later stages of life – they always seem to settle down into the shadows of despair. There is almost nothing more sad, and frankly, pathetic, than a pleasure-seeking aesthete at the age of 80. Their lives are chronicles of misdirected longings. Apart from God there is no eating or enjoyment.

In v.26 we get a remarkable statement on the workings of God's providence. For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. We need to notice a few things here. The one who pleases God, in this context, means the one who receives life (food and drink and labor) as a gift from God. This is an open-handed receptive person. To that person God gives – again this is pure grace – he gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. The very things Solomon had despaired of grasping in the midst of the vapor. Here they are given by God. This is the other side, the flip side, of what Solomon called the grievous business given to the sons of men. Note especially – joy. Right here on the waterslide that ends in the abyss of death. Right here in the vaporizing parade that is walking into a firing squad at the end of the block. Right here – joy. And wisdom and knowledge.

The other side of this providence is that to the sinner – and here this means one who grasps, who seeks gain, leverage, surplus, one who is trying to shepherd the wind – to that one God gives something else. He gives that one the business of gathering and collecting. Notice the word, business. It harkens back to the evil business that God has given the sons of men. For the one who does not live by faith, does not live in the grace of God, the evil business is unrelieved. He is grasping the wind, but ultimately he is gathering and collecting for the one who pleases God. Here Solomon sees the inheritance of the righteous, not by sight or observation, but by faith. In the end, the wealth of the nations, the grasping and leveraging and striving of men under the sun, in the end it flows into the city of God. It is good for us to get this affirmation from Solomon, because he has made and will make a lot of observations that seem to call it into question.

He concludes this remarkable text with something a little puzzling. He says, at the end of v.26: This also is vanity and striving after wind. There are three ways to take this all of which have something to teach us. First, it could refer to the task the sinner has of gathering and collecting for the one who pleases God. That is certainly a striving after wind. Second, it could refer to the whole course of God's providence in v.26 – meaning the distribution of providence is inscrutable to us. That is surely true. It could also be a summary of the whole text. All of vv.24-26. We tend to resist this because how can all the good things, the food and drink and labor and wisdom and joy be vanity or vapor?

Here is where we tie a lot of the book to this point together. Here is where we can see how what Solomon says here squared with what he has said up to this point. The good gifts from the hand of God in this passage, all the blessed enjoyment of life and labor, do NOT take the vaporizing and ungraspable quality of life away. Life is still vapor and seeking leverage is STILL like grasping the wind. These gifts are RECEIVED not grasped for. And the gifts do not take the vanity away – they make it enjoyable. The joy is ON the waterslide, IN the parade walking up the block.

So let me summarize. First, all that Solomon has said to this point is true. Yet, in the midst of this grimness, this vapor, you can have joy. A joy all the more precious because you now see the world in all of its unvarnished, twisted, unmanageable reality.

Second, this joy is for those who please God, which here means those in the posture of open-handed receptivity. Those who have stopped grasping. Those who have resigned managing life for their own gain. The joy is always an indirect by-product. That's why we are surprised by it. Seek first the KOG and all these things will be added unto you.

Third, while this gift does not remove the vapor, it does mean that your LABOR, your TOIL is not only enjoyable, but it is not IN VAIN IN THE LORD. God does providentially rule to bless his people – appearances to the contrary

notwithstanding. So, whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God.

Finally, God has made all things for his own pleasure (Rev 4 tells us). And man is the crown of that divine pleasure. This means God longs for us to have this joy. The second century church father, Irenaeus, said: the glory of God is the human person fully alive.

The human beings Solomon calls us to be here are fully alive. And as such they bring great glory to God in their joy. God calls you to THIS joy. It is the simplest, purest form of gratitude. There is NOTHING BETTER than this enjoyment. Praise be to God for the gifts of eating, drinking and laboring. Amen.

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