

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
“Holy Hedonism”
February 4, 2024

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ²I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

⁹So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹Then 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. ¹

What a challenging piece of scripture. I mean, the writer blatantly states all the sinful ways of his life that he has attempted to bring himself pleasure and meaning...things that are no different than what people do

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ec 2:1–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

today. He tried it all. Achieved it all. Gained it all. Used items. Used people. Did everything he wanted for his own sake seeking, apparently by his own words, to satisfy his longing for meaning in life and yet...at the end he says it once more “All was vanity and a striving after wind.”

This is like the opposite of a common high school graduation speech.

Think about it. The typical speech given at graduation to the gathered crowd of high school graduates tends to celebrate the academic achievements of a few. Congratulate the crowd for getting to the finish line. All that is fine. Then, there are often the sugar-coated speeches that tend to be filled with items elevating the worth of the listeners to encourage them to succeed.

Thus, you should “follow your heart.” You can be whatever you desire. Just work hard and you can succeed. You can do it!!!! You’re the man, or woman. You have made us all so proud, but not as proud as you will when you finish the next step. You are the future!!!! You! You! You!

And then, the tassel is moved from one side of the mortarboard to the other. Photographs are taken. Music plays. The hats are thrown into the air and families gather, go out to eat and...well, life. Get to work or go to school, or get to boot camp, or whatever. You did it, but you know, it’s just the beginning right. So...don’t rest.

Yet, here we have Solomon (whom most believe wrote this book) at a different point in life. So, it’s like he’s at the opposite of high school graduation. Closer to the finish line than the starting line. He has achieved and accomplished much. But...something is missing. Something *huge* is missing.

The Preacher who writes this is not like the prodigal son described by Christ in Luke 15. The prodigal gorges on pleasures because he believes that is his right. The Preacher seemingly doubts that this hole in his life can truly find anything to fill it. Thus, in wisdom the Preacher tests his

hypothesis and weathers the challenges in seeking the truth. The prodigal consumes all that is under the sun. The Preacher contends with it.²

But as we look at this section of Ecclesiastes, we are drawn to the very graphic descriptions of one seeking to make life make sense. It is like trying to hold smoke in your hand. It is, as the Preacher says, “a striving after the wind.” And listen, there’s no Sunday school class share time of weekly highs and lows or Christian hashtag that will fix this.

Therefore, when Solomon pulls back the curtain and declares “Here I am. This is what I am thinking. This is what I am struggling to grasp. This is the real me, dealing with the real questions of life, and attempting to make sense of it all” it can be troubling and comforting simultaneously.

What Solomon indulges is that which tempts many, if not all.

In this journey, the Preacher sought purpose in three things:

- **Pleasure**
- **Possessions**
- **Power**

SEEKING PURPOSE IN PLEASURE

Is it wrong to desire pleasure?

Is it sinful to want to go on a cruise, visit a theme park, attend a party, to laugh, to dance, to have fun? Is fun a sin?

Despite what some have stated and sought to mandate for others, **seeking happiness is not a sin.**

² Eswine, Zach. *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 63.

Blaise Pascal wrote, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception.”³

Jonathan Edwards clarified this reality when he stated that “Jesus knew that all mankind were in the pursuit of happiness. He has directed them in the true way to it, and he tells them what they must become in order to be blessed and happy.”⁴

Thus, the pursuit of happiness, or pursuit of pleasure is part of what makes us human. Yet, with every good and godly thing, the enemy has warped it, shifted it, caused it to be less than it should and even uses it to entice many not to walk in the true way at all.

This is what we see in the folly of the Preacher. He has sought pleasure and justified his actions by claiming it to be his test through wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-3

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.⁵

“I will test with pleasure.” – his justified experiment.

What is happening here? Don’t miss this. The image-bearer of God gifted great wisdom and overwhelming riches and influence is, even if unknowingly, playing God.

“I will *test*.”

³ Pascal, Blaise. *Pascal’s Pensees*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), 113.

⁴ Edwards, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 905.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:1–3.

Why? To give himself an excuse to do whatever he wants. I mean, it's just a test. It's just an experiment. It's just a season of trying some things...you know, so he can share with others. Right.

Music. Laughter. Alcohol. Party on!

Ecclesiastes 2:8b

I got singers, both men and women⁶

In an era when most singers in a setting such as this were men, Solomon brags that he had singers – both men and women. He broke the standards to get what he wanted...and he wanted women (more on that soon.)

The same writer who gave wise warning of indulging alcohol to extremes in the book of Proverbs...

Proverbs 20:1

**Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.⁷**

...states that he sought to “cheer his body with wine” for the sake of pleasure. Drunkenness? Maybe not stated clearly, but many commentators note the direction of using alcohol to extremes here...you know, as a test. A bit duplicitous. The Preacher's approach here is so contrary to the wisdom of Proverbs it causes the reader to wonder what type of definition of wisdom Solomon is using.⁸

Desiring pleasure and seeking happiness are not sins, but when the end goal is simply pleasing self at whatever cost, the sin of self-worship and idolatry are revealed.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:8.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Pr 20:1.

⁸ Bartholomew, Craig G. *Ecclesiastes: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 131.

Is this what Solomon was sliding into? I believe so. I believe he believed so, too.

The created played Creator by becoming a **hedonist**.

Hedonism prioritizes pleasure in one's lifestyle, actions, or thoughts to bring meaning and contentment.⁹ This is a perennial temptation.¹⁰ Seriously – who wouldn't desire pleasure?

But as we journey with Solomon, and perhaps see ourselves and others we know revealed in his journey, we will ultimately come to the same conclusion that he did.

SEEKING PURPOSE IN POSSESSIONS

The lure of more. Solomon gives a discourse of all that he had built and accumulated. The list is long and even longer than what is given here when you read about his possessions in 1 Kings.

Yet, in his journey for meaning, he reveals that just having more stuff was a goal but left him wanting.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-8a

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.¹¹

This passage reminds me of one of Toby Keith's songs.

⁹ "Hedonism." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Jan. 2024, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hedonism>.

¹⁰ Bartholomew, 135.

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:4–8.

This is the “I Wanna Talk About Me” portion of the book.

I made great works.
I built houses.
I planted vineyards.
I made gardens.
I made parks.
I planted fruit trees.
I made pools.
I bought slaves.
I had herds.
I had flocks.
I have silver.
I have gold.
I...I...I...

Do you see the problem?

Think about all this but look at the garden portion. Maybe not the one that stands out the most to us today, but this is very important. In one commentary, the author reveals that Solomon created a secular Garden of Eden...with no forbidden fruits.¹²

If not already, we will soon see that the theme of this book is Solomon’s recognition that sin has stolen perfection, and he is attempting recreate his own Garden of Eden (his own paradise – compound – place of life) where he is Creator and King.

SEEKING PURPOSE IN POWER

Power over others creates a false sense of importance. In Solomon’s hedonistic journey to find meaning, he created pleasure experiences, gathered as much stuff as he could, and used people.

¹² Kidner, Derek, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 32.

Solomon's abuses of power over others were multi-faceted, but as revealed in this passage, he leaned heavily into sexual sin. Solomon's porn addiction was on full display. Yet his porn was not limited to two-dimensional imagery or some voyeuristic endeavor, but included slaves, female singers perhaps, and certainly a host of concubines. And don't fool yourselves into thinking that all the wives and concubines he accumulated were simply for treaty purposes with other nations.

I will not get graphic but connect the dots here. Solomon, the Preacher is clear.

Ecclesiastes 2:8b

I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. ¹³

Sexual desire is not sinful. As John Piper stated, freedom from the power of sinful desire, including sexual desire that does not conform to God's design in heterosexual, monogamous marriage relationships, comes through:

1. Hearing the promises of God
2. Seeing and knowing the glory of God through those promises
3. Being transformed by what we see into the likeness of God's nature.
4. Escaping the corruption that held us in bondage.¹⁴

But...power plays are not always and only in the realm of sexuality.

If you find yourself fighting to be the answer man or answer woman at work, in church, among your peers...all the time, you may be drifting here. If you complain that everyone always comes to you for answers...it may be that you have positioned yourself to be the only one

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:8.

¹⁴ Piper, John. *Living in the Light: Money, Sex & Power* (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2016), 55.

with an answer. Thus, a power move (even and most often unintentional.)

Power is seductive and the enemy is cunning.

Politics. People. Positions. All places where the hedonism of power can grow.

BUT...WE HAVE A HOPE.

Our answer is **HOLY HEDONISM**.

This is the Good News.

Pleasure, possessions, and power are not the problem. They can be, but most often they just reveal the problem.

Are you the hero of your story? Are you fighting to find meaning? Are you struggling to matter? Do you complain about everyone using you, but actually set yourself up to be essential?

Solomon is so much like all of us. Except that most of us are not Taylor Swift rich like he is, so we struggle to relate.

All of us can relate at the core of this drive for hedonism.

But, there is a better way.

What is holy hedonism?

Pleasure that comes from the enjoyment of God.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 53.

This level of pleasure will never happen when we pursue pleasure for the sake of pleasure or live in such a way that being personally pleased with our pleasure, possessions, and power over others drive us. This will lead all of us to the very same answer the wisest man to ever live discovered.

Ecclesiastes 2:11

Then 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. ¹⁶

But in Christ, there is a holy hedonism available. Every good and perfect gift is from God. He is a God of pleasure. This is found true in Christ alone. There is godly pleasure in everything Solomon mentions (laughter, buildings, gardens, homes) if not done for self and our own applause.

In the eighteenth century a poor Christian woman whose name is long lost to humanity, but known by God, wrote these words:

I do not know when I have had happier times in my soul than when I have been sitting at work, with nothing before me but a candle and a white cloth, and hearing no sound but that of my own breath, with God in my soul and heaven in my eye. I rejoice in being exactly where I am—a creature capable of loving God, and who, as long as God lives, must be happy. I get up and look a while out of the window. I gaze at the moon and stars, the work of an Almighty Hand. I think of the grandeur of the universe and then sit down and think myself one of the happiest beings in it.¹⁷

Have you experienced that type of contentment? Guess what, you were created by a loving God to be one of the happiest beings in the universe.

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 2:11.

¹⁷ Ryken, 54-55.

Seriously. But you will never, ever experience that if you live on the path of purpose for your own pleasure.

The goodness expressed here is only found when you seek the glory of God. If it's all about you...you will end up a poor man's Solomon with emptiness and vanity as your end.

But it doesn't have to be that way.