

The Pursuit of Happiness

Lessons in Futility, Despair & Hope ...

Pleasure



OUTLINE: Ecclesiastes 2:1–26 ESV

I. QOHELETH [KOHELETH, THE PREACHER] TESTS HIS THESIS OF MEANINGLESSNESS IN HIS PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS (PLEASURE), 2:1-11.

A. He determined in his heart to test himself with pleasure and enjoyment, 2:1-2.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:1–2 ESV) 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?”

The Preacher finds his thesis to be true as he pursues pleasure and joy under the sun to be meaningless and the benefit of laughing and comedy to be ultimately useless.

Why did he find that his “pleasure pursuit” also was meaningless? The key was in his most basic research parameter that he set for his entire study, i.e. the entire study would be conducted “under the sun.” The universal, fundamental mistake humans make is pursuing our idea of happiness at the expense of God’s idea of happiness and joy.

Lesson: There is one place, and one place alone, in which we find fullness of joy—the presence of God.

- (Psalm 16:11 ESV) You make known to me the path of life; **in your presence there is fullness of joy**; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
- (John 15:9–11 ESV) As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, **that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.**

B. He searched his heart while still guiding himself by wisdom for ways to stimulate his body with wine in pursuit of the good life under heaven, 2:3.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:3 ESV) 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.

C. He likewise pursued the good life by immersing himself in a variety of amazing projects, 2:4-8.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:4–8 ESV) **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. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.
 - He pursued meaning by building impressive houses and planting vineyards, creating astounding gardens and parks with all kinds of fruit trees and building pools to water the trees.
 - He pursued meaning by building up and creating a joyful, impressive workforce.
 - (1 Kings 10:4–9 ESV) And when the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 5 the food of his table, **the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers,** and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the LORD, **there was no more breath in her.** 6 And she said to the king, “The report was true that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom, 7 but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. And behold, the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity surpass the report that I heard. 8 **Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!** 9 Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.”

- iii. He pursued meaning through the status of large herds and livestock.
- iv. He pursued meaning by accumulating staggering wealth.
- v. He pursued meaning through entertainment.
- vi. He pursued meaning through sexual pleasure and intimacy.

D. He succeeded in all his endeavors, achieved surpassing greatness and found it all to be empty, 2:9-11.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:9–11 ESV) So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. **Also my wisdom remained with me.** 10 And 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. 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.
 - i. He achieved more than all his predecessors.
 - ii. His wisdom remained with him.
 - iii. He did not limit his desires.
 - iv. His final verdict remained—it was all meaningless pursuit with nothing to be gained.

Lesson: Unlimited resources combined with unbridled desire will not allow you to escape the emptiness of life. ***This is the angst of the rich and famous***—they’ve reached the top only to find the same meaningless world they experienced at the bottom and from which there is no escape.

Angst... an acute but nonspecific sense of dread, anxiety, or anguish. Often, angst refers to philosophical displeasure with world events or personal freedom. An angst-filled person is dissatisfied and unhappy.

II. QOHELETH BROADENS HIS RESEARCH TO EXPLORE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WISDOM AND MADNESS AND FOLLY, 2:12-17.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 ESV) So I turned to

consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. 13 **Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.** 14 **The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.** 15 Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. **How the wise dies just like the fool!** 17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

A. No one was better qualified for this project.

The Preacher turned his thoughts to consider wisdom and madness and folly believing no one could be better qualified than he was.

B. Wisdom is better but the wise man dies just like the fool.

The Preacher determined that the life of wisdom was meaningless since although wisdom was better than folly the wise dies just like the fool, he came to hate life. Discovering the meaninglessness of life at its pinnacle under the sun causes the person to hate life.

Lesson: Hating life and grieving over the emptiness of life are symptomatic of a misdirected life—a life lived “under the sun” and apart from God.

III. QOHELETH DISCOVERS THAT THE MISDIRECTED PURSUIT OF JOY BRINGS A PERSON TO DESPAIR, 2:18-26.

A. The Preacher is overwhelmed by despair when he realizes that all his hard work will be left to someone who may be foolish and undeserving, 2:18-23.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:18–23 ESV) **I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,** 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for

which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 **So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,** 21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 23 For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

B. The Preacher realizes that it is only by the hand of God that the hard worker finds enjoyment and satisfaction in his work, 2:24-25.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:24–25 ESV) There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. **This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,** 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

C. The Preacher realizes that the only hope for true joy is to be one who pleases God, 2:26.

- (Ecclesiastes 2:26 ESV) **For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy,** but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Ian Provan ... Wisdom, by contrast, acknowledges God and not the self as the center of existence and gladly embraces the limitations of the creature set within the larger, massive reality of creation. **Reality having been embraced, it is possible to know joy.** [Provan, I. (2001). *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (p. 77). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.]

- The Preacher acknowledges God’s grace in the lives of those who “embrace reality” and walk in his way.
 - (Psalm 27:11 ESV) **Teach me your way, O LORD,** and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

- (Psalm 77:13 ESV) **Your way, O God, is holy.** What god is great like our God?
- (Psalm 77:19–20 ESV) **Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters;** yet your footprints were unseen. 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.
- (Psalm 86:11–12 ESV) **Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.** 12 I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.
- (Proverbs 3:5–6 ESV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 **In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.**

ii. The Preacher contrasts the one who pleases God with the sinner who misses the mark—the one who lives apart from God and misses the way of life and joy.

“Sinner” in 2:26 ... hata ... to miss; hence (figuratively and generally) to sin; by inference, to forfeit, lack ... to miss, miss the way, go wrong, incur guilt, forfeit; to miss the goal or path of right and duty; to miss the mark; to induce to sin, cause to sin; to bring into guilt or condemnation or punishment; to lose oneself, wander from the way.

- (Romans 3:23 ESV) **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**

“Have sinned” ... ἁμαρτάνω hamartanō ... to miss the mark (and so not share in the prize); to be without a share; to miss or wander from the path of uprightness and honor; to do or go wrong; to wander from the law of God, violate God’s law, sin.

Lesson: Despair sometimes brings hope. You don’t have to miss the mark. You can change direction and allow the despair of life bring you to the joy of life under the care and instruction of God.



(Hosea 6:3 NLT) Oh, that we might know the Lord! Let us press on to know him. **He will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn** or the coming of rains in early spring.