

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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[0 : 00] please turn in your Bibles back to Ecclesiastes 2, 1-11. And while you're turning there, I'll just introduce myself briefly. I'm Matthew. I'm one of the pastoral interns at the church in Hyde Park.

I'm preaching tonight as Robert's out of town. Again, we'll be looking at Ecclesiastes 2, verses 1-11 together. But first, let's pray. Holy Father, I thank you for your word and for your church.

I ask you that in this time your spirit would guide me as I preach, and that it would guide all of us as we hear your word together, that your word would strengthen us and shape us to look more like Jesus Christ, your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The way David read Ecclesiastes 2 just now, it felt very fitting. It almost sounded like an Ernest Hemingway novel, just condensed into 11 verses. Just a short, sad story of an empty pursuit.

Which is basically what we find before us tonight. If you've ever done a science project, some of you might have to think a ways back for that, even myself. You might be familiar with the basic format.

[1 : 09] You have the question or the hypothesis, what you're trying to figure out. And then you have the test itself, how you go about gathering the data. And then the conclusion, the summary of your findings.

And tonight's passage has a very similar format. The subject under the magnifying glass, so to speak, is pleasure. And the author, you might remember from last week, is either King Solomon himself or a kingly figure much like Solomon.

I'll just refer to him as a king. And he's in the laboratory of life, so to speak, running an experiment on pleasure. And trying to figure out, looking at it in its various forms, does this have ultimate meaning?

And on either side of this experiment, in the text before us, or the text before ours and the text following ours, he's doing the same thing with other virtues and activities of life. He's looking at wisdom, and at folly, and at living wisely, and at toil.

And he's putting all these under the magnifying glass, and he's asking, is this it? Is this the chief end of man? Is this why we are about, under the sun, running about alive?

[2 : 19] Is this what we are to be pursuing? And with each one, the answer is, no. This, too, is a vanity. It's not a satisfying reason for existence.

And the same, we'll see, is true for pleasure. So we can divide our text tonight into three parts of the experiment. We have the question, which he poses in verses 1 through 2.

We have the test, verses 3 through 8, where he describes how he goes about finding out the answer to his question. And then we have the conclusion, verses 9 through 11, when he offers his assessment on the ordeal.

So the question, the test, and the conclusion. Let's take a look at the question. It's an implied question, and it drives the experiment. The question is, is the pursuit of pleasure ultimately meaningful?

Take a look at verse 1. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. He's talking to himself. He's having an internal self-dialogue.

[3 : 23] He's saying, self, enjoy yourself, and see if you find meaning there. It's a dialogue with his own rational mind. I want to take a look at the phrase, enjoy yourself.

Some commentators translate this, experience the good life, or be happy. This is basically what we're asking tonight. Does the good life satisfy the soul?

Is it what we should pursue? The good life might look different to different people. It could look like high, high salary, living, you know, high-rise downtown Chicago.

It could look like a quiet cabin in the woods where no one's bothering you. It's just you and your cup of tea and your book. It could be the travel lifestyle where you're just on the road or on the plane all the time.

Just you and your pack in the open road. It could be a variety of things. For the king, his good life is basically this. A party and a private empire.

[4 : 22] Everything the body can enjoy, everything the hands can make, and everything money can buy. That's what the king's going to pursue to see if pleasure is the chief end of man. And he gives the verdict a little early, before he actually runs the test.

He says in the end of verse 1, Behold, this also was a vanity. Pastor Jackson mentioned this last week, but it bears repeating that vanity here means basically meaningless, futile, empty.

The image is of a vapor in the wind. So imagine your breath in the cold Chicago air. Shouldn't be that hard to do, given the winter we just suffered through. So your body works to create that energy and that heat, and then it lets it out in a breath.

All that toil comes out in a breath, and it just disappears into the bitter cold air forever and ever. That's a vanity. It's so temporary. It's just useless, meaningless.

And that being said, we have to bear in mind the author's perspective, unless we take at absolute face value everything that he says about everything being totally meaningless, including wisdom, and work, and living wisely.

[5 : 35] These things that the Bible clearly endorses for us. He's considering all these things through two filters. He's thinking about life under the sun, and the fact that life is short, and death is imminent.

So it's a pretty pessimistic perspective. One commentator said it this way. The theological message of the king's autobiography, which is basically everything from verses 1-12 to 12-7, is this.

Life is full of trouble, and then you die. He adds his perspective on the world, and life is restricted. He describes it as life under the sun.

That is, apart from the heavenly realities, apart from God. In other words, his hopelessness is the result of the curse of the fall without recourse to God's redemption.

So then we hear his judgments of all being totally meaningless, as we do so knowing that he means for ultimate meaning and purpose. And this is the preemptive judgment that he makes about pleasure.

[6 : 39] Take a look at verse 2. I said of laughter, it is mad. And of pleasure, what use is it? The two are used as a couplet and have the effect of providing a sort of spectrum of pleasure.

It's like a quicker pleasure, like a laugh that's there and then it's gone, to something more long and sustained, like joy. Both of them the king condemns as ultimately meaningless.

So what test of pleasure has the king run to come to this conclusion? Let's take a look at verses 3 through 8, where he's going to basically lay it out for us.

In short, he parties and he builds an empire. Like I said, take a look at verse 3. He begins by searching how to cheer his body with wine. Now he says that his heart is still guiding him with wisdom, which makes us wonder, is he getting intoxicated or maybe just a little buzzed?

Or what sort of spectrum of cheering the body with wine are we talking about? One writer says he explores wine not as a drunkard, but as a connoisseur. But whatever the case, he enjoyed himself with wine.

[7 : 48] And the point is that he's taking to more immediate sensual pleasures, and he's testing those. He also lays hold on folly. Suggests that he doesn't just dabble in it, but he really dives in.

I mean, to lay hold on something is to go for it. So, folly can take a number of forms, but perhaps the best way to understand it is the opposite of wisdom and prudence. And he does this until he might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

So I think I've seen this whole idea packaged on a t-shirt pretty well. Life is short. Drink good beer. It's almost what's in mind here of, you know, life is short, so maybe we should just party all the time, and that's what we should do.

And so he's testing instant pleasure. A test that many young people in our country run every weekend. We live on a college campus. We don't have to imagine this. We see it often. Sometimes even during the week.

And so this is the king testing sensual, more immediate pleasures. There's four transitions to different forms of pleasure. It tells us that after the king leaves the party, he starts some building projects, hopefully after the wine is worn off.

[9 : 02] It says he makes great works, or I made great works. So this is the beginning of his empire building, and in a sense, he builds his own little Eden. Let me take a look.

He builds houses, vineyards, and gardens, and parks, and he plants in them all kinds of trees. He even makes pools from which to water the forests of growing trees.

So he builds gardens and parks so big that they're better deemed a forest, and he needs to build pools now to water this forest that he's built. It's excessive.

It reminds me, and I'm going to say this, of a line from Aladdin, if I can quote a Disney movie in a liturgical service. It reminds me of this line in Aladdin where Aladdin, who's this poor street rat, and he's pretending to be a prince so he can impress Prince Jasmine.

And she says, haven't I seen you in the marketplace? And he says, no, no. I have my servants go to the marketplace for me. In fact, I have servants who go to the marketplace for my servants. The point is just this excessive wealth that he's trying to portray.

[10 : 02] The same sort of idea is here, just excessive wealth. He has ponds for his forests. It's, um, it noticed, though, whom the works are for, himself. Look at verse four, the end.

I planted vineyards for myself, verse five. I made myself gardens and parks, verse six. I made myself pools from which to water the forest. All of these efforts are for his own satisfaction.

he sets out to see if pleasure would satisfy so he builds an empire to the sky for himself but he doesn't stop there after he forms his Eden he fills it look at verse 7 he buys slaves slaves that reproduce more slaves he has more livestock than any who had been before him in Jerusalem he also gathers for himself note again for himself silver and gold and the treasure of kings in provinces which may suggest that his dominion was so expansive that he was gleaning treasures from other nations people outside the boundaries of Israel and if this king is Solomon which this description suggests it is given the wealth then 2nd Chronicles 9, 28 gives us an idea of just how much silver he had it says he made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone or 1st Kings 10, 12 or 10, 21 all of King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold none were of silver silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon so rich that a piece of silver on the ground we wouldn't even pick it up it would be like a penny that we would just walk right past so in short if the ancient Near East had Forbes magazine

I think this king would be on the front cover every issue I mean he was as rich as can be and he got his fill of entertainment too he has singers he hires singers both men and women and many concubines the delight of the children of men put it all together he's almost got his own little Moulin Rouge I mean he is every every pleasure he could indulge in he is body and mind and when you consider the whole the parties and the buildings and the wealth and the entertainment all of it together you might think at least my mind thought of the great Gatsby Jay Gatsby the self-made millionaire party thrower who has it all and in abundance so this king this is the test he runs he explores every nook and cranny of pleasure that you could imagine if anyone ever ever could know if pleasure satisfies it's this king and here we turn to the conclusion of the experiment the final assessment look at verse 9 he sort of sums it up for us so I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem and also my wisdom remained with me he built his empire but with wisdom not mindless self-indulgence but he built it and it was huge the biggest there ever was he says whatever my eyes desired whatever

I did not keep from them I kept my heart from no pleasure whatever he wanted he got it the whole nine yards and why?

[13 : 32] for my heart found pleasure in all my toil and this was my reward for all my toil so why did he pursue it? because it made his heart glad at least to some extent that's what the text is saying and we don't have to try hard to imagine this a heart quickened by pleasure I think most of us can relate with that just a few weeks ago I was driving from the northern suburbs back into the city and my buddy and I decided to take a detour through the north shore which is about like a six mile stretch north of Evanston runs along the coast and as my friend says this is where Chicago's money is so we were going to do some mansion spotting and we spotted some mansions I mean we probably drove for 30 minutes and it was just mansion after mansion and well manicured lawn after well manicured lawn and Range Rover after Range Rover and Cadillac and everything was glistening in the sun and it just looked perfect and when I finally saw a Toyota it was like a breath of fresh air like oh okay I'm back but the whole time

I'm driving around my head you know looking out the window and I'm oohing and I'm aahing and I'm almost drooling and I'm just enthralled with it all and my covetous little idolatrous heart was sort of beating a little faster in that moment and I joked to my friend why am I in seminary?

I should have gone to business school like what are we doing? and I was joking but there was definitely a sentiment of reality there where I was seeing the wealth and I was imagining the lifestyles and I was imagining the empires and the people behind them and I wanted it I wanted that good life and so you know it's easy to sit above this text and look at this king and say oh stop that pursuit it's not going to fulfill you but I think the reality is that many of us find ourselves more in the text and not even making the same conclusions that the king is making that it's all vanity I mean look at the way we flock to Vegas or camp outside of a Best Buy on Thanksgiving or you know work our fingers to the bone for that extra figure and of course I'm not condemning vacations or you know catching a sail or working hard those are good things but my point is our affections identify the good life and they target it and our heart extends toward it to some variety of degree we pursue it sort of imagine our American dream and we go for it and the results at least for the king of this pursuit are are not good verse 11 then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil

I had extended in doing it and behold all was vanity and a striving after the wind and there was nothing to be gained under the sun I I achieved pleasure to the maximum degree but all was meaningless nothing was gained I looked at all I had and all that I worked for the parties the houses the gardens the vineyards the parks the slaves the livestock the gold the silver the treasures the performers the concubine I looked at all of it and I said nothing was gained I mean he looked at the treasure of treasures and called it nothing sounds like something a billionaire might say on his deathbed when everything is in perspective or in the words of this modern proverb you never see a U-Haul behind a hearse things don't follow us out so the author's aim is to show us that the pursuit of pleasure while enjoyable to some extent is ultimately meaningless like most parts of the book of Ecclesiastes this section doesn't resolve we're left wondering okay so if it's not pleasure then what is it what does have ultimate meaning not to ruin the ending but to ruin the ending if you look ahead to 1213 it says the end of the matter all has been heard fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man we hear a similar sentiment in Philippians in chapter 3 7-8 you don't need to turn there

Paul is talking about his supreme obedience and his standing as a Pharisee among Pharisees and he says but whatever gain I had I count it as loss for the sake of knowing Christ indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish or as a piece of silver in Solomon's day in order that I may gain Christ the king in our passage says there's nothing to be gained under the sun and he's right but there's something to be gained above the sun and that is Christ Jesus and his eternal life consider Colossians 3 1-2 if then you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God set your mind on the things that are above not on the things that are on earth so let's not chase after the good life here it's a vapor in the wind we can't bring it with us so let's search our heart target the winds that we're chasing and stop stop chasing them and instead in truism let's chase after Christ knowing and obeying him being found in him attaining the resurrection from the dead and enjoy above the sun eternal glory in Christ himself forever and that chase will give meaning to our lives and the things that we enjoy under the sun let's pray

[19 : 49] God let us not strive after the wind seeking pleasure let us strive after Christ and the inheritance that we have in him you have given us good things to enjoy on earth but let our chief pursuit be the fear of God the keeping of his commandments until we come to our treasure that is in heaven Amen