

# Keep Him the Goal

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 January 2021

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] So we are continuing in our series in Ecclesiastes. We're in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 tonight. Last week we dealt with these really famous words, vanity, vanity, all is vanity.

So what was the preacher in Ecclesiastes last week trying to get us to understand? And I think it was a bit of a sort of get over yourself sort of message. He's wanting us to see that the universe is just, we're not in as much control as we think.

But we have this gift of a life. It's short, it's fragile, it's unpredictable, but embrace it for what it actually is, not what you think it should be.

Live in it hopefully in reverence to God. So that was last week. How does it relate to Ecclesiastes chapter 2? Well, this life which is hard to make sense of, this life which always has death on the horizon, how do we cope with it?

How do we navigate it? How do we deal with it? The preacher says to himself, well, I'm going to have a couple of cracks at coping with this life. And my first crack is at just straight pleasure.

[ 1 : 15 ] Just unadulterated pleasure. I'm going to commit my life to straight up happiness. Every decision I make, we measured by the question, does this make me happy?

And nothing is off the table here. That's what chapter 2 is all about. He's thinking perhaps he can beat his existential dismay.

This world of vanity. Johnny Cash sang a song called The Wanderer. Here's one verse from it. I went out there in search of experience to taste and to touch and to feel as much as a man can before he repents.

So this is what the preacher does. He's thinking to himself, I feel like there's no meaning. But perhaps if I make pleasure the priority of my whole life, that feeling will go away.

So that's what he does. But he's not out there like some frat house hooligan. He's thoughtful about it. Look at verse 1. I said to my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure.

[ 2 : 27 ] I will test you with pleasure. He's an experimental hedonist. He's going to throw himself at as much pleasure as he can, and then he's going to assess it.

So how does that experiment go for him? Well, we get the answer very quickly in the second half of verse 1. I'll read the whole thing again to you. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure.

Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. So his experiment with pleasure didn't work out for him. A life focused on straight-up happiness.

It held out the promise of meaning, but in the end, it was as substantive as vapor, as mist. It was a life that just sort of floated away.

So we have the results of his experiment. But he does helpfully for us go through all the things he tried in his search for a life of worthwhileness.

[ 3 : 29 ] And that's what verses 2 to 8 are about. So what did he try? We've got this list of them. Trying to make sense of life. Trying to make it feel like it's worthwhile.

Trying to avoid thinking about death. What are some of the things he tried? Well, the first one on his list is just laughter. Just laughter. Verse 2, I said of laughter, it is mad.

And of pleasure, what use is it? So he tries laughter. Just endless joking. Now, I love a good laugh. I love a good meme. In fact, I am a connoisseur of memes.

I can get lost in them. Sometimes on my feed, it will say, 57 memes to take your mind off the real world is kind of how it gets pitched at me. And it does that for a time.

And you can make your whole life about that, though. You can make your whole life about fun, laughter, constant joking. That was actually, to be honest, pretty much my 20s. In the end, the preacher says, look, it's just madness.

[ 4 : 26 ] So he moves on from laughter to what? In verse 3. If you have your Bibles open, then you'll see there he moves on from laughter to alcohol. I foresee no problems there.

So let me read it to you. Verse 3. So again, he has this weird detachment from what he's doing. He's sort of analyzing the effects it has on his psyche. It's not mindless hedonism. He's going, okay, there's a life of joking and drinking. Will that sustain me existentially?

He tries more things, we see. More things. And he really lifts his game here in verses 4, 5, and 6. I'll read it to you. The preacher took on these great projects.

The perfect house, the fantastic garden, the indoor-outdoor flow. He set out to just transform his environment, to maximize his pleasure. And it actually sounds like he's trying to recreate paradise in his life, doesn't it?

[ 5 : 55 ] Verse 7. His life just seems to get better and better. I bought male and female slaves. I had slaves that were born in my house. I had also great possessions, herds and flocks, more than anyone who had been before me in Jerusalem.

So he's got loads of money. He's got servants. He's got people. He's got staff. I'm so jealous of people that have people. You meet people sometimes, and they have people.

And they say, I'll get my people. I'll get my people to do the stuff that I don't want to do. He's got people. Wouldn't you want this life? Wouldn't this make your life easier? Wouldn't it make it more pleasurable?

If you could get away with it, wouldn't you want some of this? And what if I threw verse 8 into the mix? Listen to this. And I gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.

I got singers, men and women singers. Concubines. Concubines. Concubines. Concubines. The delight of the sons of men. He had the house. He had the palatial grounds. He had the money. He had the wine.

[ 6 : 51 ] He had the resources. He had the sex. He had the singers. He had singers. He had his own singers. He had the art. He had culture. He had the sophisticated life. He did the pleasure thing better than anyone has had it before.

Verse 9 and 10. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Whatever my eyes desired.

Whatever my eyes desired. I did not keep from them. He does it all. He does the young person thing of sex and drink. He does the middle age thing of the nice house and the great garden.

He does the old person thing. The sort of the sophisticated appreciate art and music kind of business. And how did it pan out for him? Well remember this was a pleasure experiment right? After enjoying all of this he says to himself. Okay what was the payoff here? And the answer is in verse 11. And then I considered all that my hands had done. And the toil I had expended in doing it.

[ 7 : 57 ] And behold. All was vanity. Vapor. Mist. And striving after wind.

There was nothing to be gained under the sun. So in the end. A life dedicated to just pleasure. And he did it better than anyone else. It was vacuous.

It was empty. It failed to satisfy him. He was trying to invest his life with some meaning. By just seeking pleasure. And he said it was like chasing the wind.

Which is of course impossible isn't it? You can't capture the wind. You can't bottle it up and save it for the next day. That's the pleasure life. It's like chasing the wind.

So. Here's the question we have to ask ourselves. Because it sounds pretty good this life doesn't it? What was the problem? Why did this experiment yield a big no?

[ 8 : 55 ] Is it because pleasure is bad? Is God against pleasure? Well no. No, no, no, no. In the Screwtape Letters. By Lewis. Towards the end.

There's a little scene. Of a senior demon. A senior devil. Speaking to a junior devil. And it's very interesting what the senior devil says. He says this.

Never forget. That when we are dealing with pleasure. We are in. In a sense. On the enemy's ground. The enemy being God.

I'll say it again. Never forget. That when we are dealing with pleasure. We are in a sense. On the enemy's ground. Pleasure is good. Now the word pleasure I think has.

And the English word pleasure. It has this sort of sense of forbiddenness about it. Which is unfortunate. It's unhelpful for what we're trying to do here. But food. And wine. And art. And well designed homes.

[ 9 : 51 ] And gardens. And sex. None of this is bad. It's good. I mean obviously. If you get into the details. Herems. That's obviously very dehumanizing. But sex itself. Is not bad.

So why did it fail? Why does the experiment fail? It failed because sex. Joy is limited in what it can achieve. Now if you've tuned out in the sermon.

This is the time you tune back in. This is very important. Joy is limited in what it can achieve in your life. It failed because pleasure simply.

It can't carry the weight of the meaning we place on it. You know if you're looking for a life. It's just the succession of pleasurable experiences. The YOLO life.

I mean it sounds brilliant but it's a work around. It's a Hail Mary pass. It won't satisfy you. You're hoping it will give you a sense of worthwhileness.

[ 10 : 47 ] It just cannot deliver on that. Now one of the reasons. There's a multiplicity of reasons for this. But one of the reasons is that often people who are seeking pleasure are actually looking for something else.

So sex for example. Hooking up with lots of people. There's more going on than just seeking pleasure isn't there? There's more going on than just sex. Because in sex.

Many people. If it's a lot of hookups. You're looking to sex. Because you want to feel wanted. You're looking to sex. Because you want to feel like you're attractive.

And you keep doing it. And you're doing it. And that feeling diminishes. Because there's a diminishing return on investment there. See the Preacher's experiment failed. Because a life of straight pleasure seeking.

It just can't deliver on the promise. That this will make your life all feel worthwhile. So. I think the next question we have to ask ourselves is.

[ 11 : 49 ] So. What kind of relationship should a Christian have with joy? What kind of relationship should a Christian have with pleasure? Well I'm going to give you just a couple of very quick answers to this.

Firstly. And most simply. Don't build your life on the pursuit of pleasure. Don't build your life on the pursuit of pleasure.

Don't make pleasure the goal. You will be disappointed in your life. Secondly. And I want to read from 1 Timothy 4 here. 1 Timothy 4.

2 to 4. Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times. And times some will depart from the faith. And the people that do that. Here's what they're going to do.

Okay. They will forbid marriage. And require abstinence from foods. That God created to be received with thanksgiving. By those who believe and know the truth.

[ 12 : 47 ] Everything that God has created is good. Nothing is to be rejected if it's received with thanksgiving. Do you see what Paul is saying here to Timothy about these folks? He's saying. There's always going to be these Christian types.

Who are like. Pleasure bad. Spiritual stuff. Good. And it's just nonsense. Right. This life of denial is not. Look. Paul says no to that.

He says. All sources of joy in your life are ultimately from God. So enjoy them with thanksgiving. The joyful experience in your life. When they happen. These joyful experiences.

And you'll have them. How do we respond to them? We say. Thank you Jesus. Jesus. Thank you Jesus. This is not what I'm going to build my life on. This is not what my life is about. Only God can give my life meaning.

But. Thank you Jesus. For this great adventure. For this fantastic glass of wine. For this nice meal. For that really funny story I just heard.

[ 13 : 43 ] And I think this is so important. Because. I find myself tormented by social media. Recently tormented. Because it's.

Where I'm originally from in New Zealand. It's summer in New Zealand. And all my friends. Back in the old country. Are on holiday. And they are holidaying. In these impossibly beautiful places.

And having these grand adventures. And I'm just reading all about it. All my old friends together. And it's just messing with me. See one of the things that social media does. Is it deludes us into thinking that. The good life.

Right. The good life. Is one where you. Where you maximize your experiences. It's all about fun. It's all about joy. It's all about new pleasures. And that can easily become.

What your life is just about. It's just about that. And some of us realize. Or some of us actually know. Some of us don't realize this. We don't realize what we're doing. Is we're prioritizing pleasure. [14:41] In our life. More than prioritizing Jesus. We're making these decisions in our life. Asking ourselves. Will this maximize my joy. Instead of asking ourselves.

Does this honor Jesus. Folks. And that's. That's just. That's just straight. Idolatry. Now. You have all seen the footage. Of these mobs.

Storming the U.S. Capitol buildings. This last week. Right. You've seen this. Some of them carrying. Christian signs. Jesus saves. God. Guns. And something else.

I can't remember the other one. But. They're dragging Jesus. Into this mess. And it's shameful. And I'm heartbroken. At the compromise message. That this.

Sends the world. About. The Christian faith. And the folks that are doing this. Are nationalists. And they believe their country. Is the most important country. On the planet. They're people whose identity.

[15:35] And meaning. Is welded to political parties. Some of them have Jesus. But clearly. A political ideology. Has more of their heart. Than Jesus. Because we know.

And we know that. Because they want to take. And overthrow. And we have a king. Who gave his life away. Now most of us. Have watched these. Watched these. Videos. And we're watching the news.

And we're looking. And we're aghast. And we're thinking. And this is crazy. And it's shameful. And these people. Are so lost. Are their idols. But so are we. On the west coast.

There are so many of us. And we just. We just want to live. The perfect. Outdoorsy. Super fun. West coast life. And we have. Welled our hearts.

Through that. Because we think. This is what makes. My life worthwhile. Our idols. Are much prettier. Than those presented. In Washington. Last week. But they're still idols. And they rob.

[16:31] The glory. They rob glory. From Jesus. So how are we to live. We are to live. In humility. And obedience. With Jesus. As our great treasure. We're supposed to accept.

The limitations of our life. Our lives. Short. And they're fragile. And they're unpredictable. But there are great joys. Within them. And we are to be. Tremendously thankful. For those.

And when we see. Those pleasures. As gifts. From God. The focus of our life. Will be on the giver. And not. The gift.

We will not become. Idolaters. I want to finish. By just reading. One of the verses. From Ecclesiastes. That I particularly love. It's later on.

In chapter 2. I read it last week. I want to read it again. He's summarizing. The chapter for us. The preacher of Ecclesiastes. He says this. In verses 24 and 25. There is nothing better.

[17:25] For a person. That he should. Eat. And drink. And find enjoyment. In his toil. This also. I saw. Is from the hand of God.

Apart from him. Who can eat. And who can have enjoyment. Enjoy. Your life. Those joys. Are gifts from God. But keep him.

The goal. That's Ecclesiastes 2. We're going to say.