

A Search For The Meaning Of Life (4) - The Pursuit Of Pleasure And The Problem Of Death

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Date: 24 November 2019

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[0 : 00] the whole chapter today and just take the way in which it's set out. It's teaching for us in the various sections that you find as we'll go through it. Solomon, that we take as the writer of Ecclesiastes, is continuing this search for the meaning of life, the purpose of human life, and as he's taken us already through the matters that we saw in chapter one, so he's coming now to continue that search, but he does it here in chapter two in three stages. You could say there are two stages and then a consideration, so three stages really, which are really in a sense experiments on his part as to finding out the meaning of life. He's weighing up the various experiences that he knows of himself, the various things that are available for him without limit really, he says, as far as possible, in life under the sun. And remember we saw how important that phrase is, that he's looking at the purpose for life or the meaning of life, but for his examination or for his looking at life under the sun, he's looking at it without taking God into his consideration for the most part. And although he mentions God, as we'll see in this passage, it's by and large looking at life without God, without God being taken into his considerations. And then he comes to the conclusion, well, what's that like? What is life about if you leave God out of your calculations or of your relationships, whatever? And you can see the first stage here in verses one to eleven, we can call that the pursuit of pleasure, the pursuit of pleasure. And then the second stage is the problem of death, verses twenty-one to twenty-three, where you'll find that the problem of death is really what comes to invade what he's saying about the pursuit of pleasure. In other words, the pursuit of pleasure in its own right might indeed give temporal pleasure to people. And as he says, that's one of the characteristics of life without God, that the pursuit of pleasure tends to be a main plank of that life. But he comes to then consider, well, what's the good of that when death comes to end it all? How can there be meaning and purpose to life if it's just a seeking of pleasure, if at the end of it all, whatever we've had in this life comes to end it all? How can there be meaning of death? How can there be meaning of death? How can you find there in verses twenty-one to twenty-three especially, or you could say really from verse eighteen to verse twenty-three? And then you come verses twenty-four to twenty-six to the third stage, which is really the provision of God. We'll see that he does come to a conclusion here that despite all that he said in the pursuit of pleasure and the problem of death, yet nevertheless God has made provision for us against the conditions of this present life. And we can see that in these final verses, that it's a matter of accepting God's arrangement and coming to not just make the best of it, but to find our hope, our delight, our future in God himself. These are the three items we're going to look at, mainly in a few points under each of these. The pursuit of pleasure there, verses one to eleven, it is, as you see in verse one, a deliberate testing on his part. This is what he said to himself.

Come now, I will test you. He's speaking to himself here. I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter it is mad, and of pleasure what uses it? I searched 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 life. There are three elements in the pursuit of pleasure that he mentions. Pleasure itself is a word that's used eight times in the book of Ecclesiastes, and this particular word is important. We'll see in a minute the distinction between pleasure and happiness, because on the thinking of Ecclesiastes, they're not the same, although people tend to think there's no difference between them. But here is using the word pleasure, which is really, in a sense, a worldly pleasure, a pursuing of pleasure, as you find in the things of this world. What he says is that God has given us this in the final verses, so that as he uses this throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, this word, it

reminds us that God is not some kind of killjoy, and that our Christian faith is not something that's designed to dampen a proper happiness, as we'll see in distinction from pleasure. But the way that he sets it out, he gives prominence to this word pleasure in his search. And it contains these three elements. First of all, enjoyment, verses one to three, success, verses four to ten, and then he comes to a conclusion in verse eleven.

So it's really about enjoyment and success in worldly terms. Look at what he's saying in verses one to three. He mentions there wine, he mentions laughter, he mentions having a good time. You have a picture there really of a king's banquet. Just imagine what a banquet must have been like in the days of Solomon, when he had all of these grand occasions, these grand banquets that he would entertain people at in his palace. Just imagine what that must have been like. The amount of wine that would be flowing freely, the amount of laughter, the amount of banter, all of that good time, worldly pleasure.

This is what he says. I gave my heart to search this, to look at this, to analyze this, to examine this. Is this really what life was about? That's the question he had in mind. He didn't actually place any limits before himself. He had all of these things in abundance.

[6:19] That's what he says that in verse ten, 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. The worldly pleasure was not limited to him. He had access to all the things that would give him worldly pleasure, physical pleasure, all the pleasures that you might say belong to life in this world under the sun.

I didn't restrict myself, he's saying. I gave myself to all of these pleasures. What did it amount to? That's the question. We'll leave it till he answers it himself. And then he mentions success from verse four through to verse ten. And look at how he describes success.

I made great works. I built houses. I planted vineyards. I made myself gardens. I made myself pools. I bought male and female slaves. I had great possessions of herds and flocks. I gathered myself silver and gold and treasure of kings. I got singers. I got men and women. I got many concubines, the delight of the children of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. He is setting out his success by way of personal achievements. Along with the pleasure, you have the success. You have the personal achievements. You have the way in which what was given him freely in God's providence to enjoy, he used in the pursuit of personal success, personal achievement, as well as his pleasure. And he didn't restrict himself, he says, in any way with that. Now what's the conclusion of all of that? Then I considered, verse eleven, that all my hands had done, and the toil I had expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. For all of this, for all my achievement, he said,

I really couldn't see anything of lasting meaning and importance in it. For all the pleasure that I packed my life with, there was nothing there that would really give me security, nothing there that would give me lasting joy, nothing there that would give me lasting happiness. There was no satisfaction, just a striving after wind, and whatever satisfaction there was in it. And there was much in worldly terms, but at the end of the day it was vanity and a striving after wind. Nothing permanent, only temporary, and even then, not really satisfying his soul. And doesn't that apply so much to our society, to our own lives, a set in that society? Isn't this what we really need to extract from this great book of Ecclesiastes? When it sets before us Solomon's great search for the meaning of life, and he packed it full of pleasure and packed it full of self-achievement. What is it in that world out there? What is natural to your own heart and to mine? Isn't it the same exactly? Isn't it the pursuit of pleasure? Isn't it pleasure in terms of enjoyment of worldly things and enjoyment leading to success?

Isn't that what the world lives for? Isn't that what's true of our society? Isn't our society drunk on entertainment and on pleasure? Pleasure in a worldly sense. Isn't that what feeds this terrible selfishness? Isn't that what destroys proper joy as the Bible describes joy? The joy of salvation, the joy of knowing God, the joy of forgiveness of sin, the joy of having Christ as your Savior, the joy of looking beyond the things that are under the sun. That's what our world is like. That's what we're like ourselves by nature. We just have that in us as fallen sinners. That really the best thing to do is to get as much pleasure, get as much entertainment, get as much success out of life as you can, and that's what's going to make you to make you happy. Well, it doesn't. Because for one thing, Ecclesiastes tells us that pleasure is not the same thing as happiness. Pleasure is not the same thing as happiness at all. The world sees pleasure and happiness pretty much as the same. Let me

just take your minds to an article that appeared in the Guardian back in September 2017, written by a professor from California, Robert

[10:41] Lustig. This is what he said, and it's still very relevant. It's a very powerful extract really from that article. It says, despite what TV and social media say, pleasure and happiness are not the same thing. Too many of our simple pleasures have morphed into something else. For example, an afternoon with friends has given way to a thousand friendings on Facebook. Government legislation has tolerated ever-available temptations. Sugar, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, social media, pornography. Combined with constant stress, work, money, home, school, cyberbullying, internet. And the end result of that is an unprecedented epidemic of addiction, anxiety, depression, and chronic disease. Thus, he says, the more pleasure you seek, the more unhappy you get. Our ability to perceive happiness has been sabotaged by our modern incessant quest for pleasure, which our consumer culture has made all too easy to satisfy. Those who abdicate happiness for pleasure will end up with neither. You see, he's making that distinction which Ecclesiastes makes as well between pleasure and happiness. Pleasure and the mindset of

Ecclesiastes is what Solomon discovered following everything that he had available to him in terms of life under the sun. Following the pleasures of this life in a material and financial and sexual way. That's what he says. These are the graphic details. That's what our world is so much characterized by. That's what people live their lives for. That's what drives them from day to day.

That here we are, a people of the gospel, a people of the church, a people who know Jesus and the gospel, who know God's principles, God's laws, God's values set out for us in the Bible. What is life about?

What is it as you look out at life under the sun? What is it that you see there that is lasting in itself? Well, Solomon says, nothing, because it doesn't provide happiness, which is distinct from pleasure. [13:08] You can have all the pleasure that this world will give you, and I can have the same. It will not make you happy. It will not satisfy the need of your soul. It will not give you what is lasting, what will take you into eternal happiness, because you find that only in Jesus, in his salvation, in God's provision of something greater than what's under the sun. That is why you find the likes of Moses, for example, described in Hebrews chapter 11.

You remember how Moses is described there as a man of faith amongst the others in that list. And what it says is that he refused by faith. When he was grown up, this was the mature man thinking about life.

He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy, to enjoy what? The fleeting pleasures of sin, or the old AV, the pleasures of sin for a season.

The temporary fleeting pleasures of sin, the things that Ecclesiastes is setting out. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. And it continues to tell us about him that he persevered and went on in his life because he saw him as seeing him who is invisible.

[14:42] That was the secret of his strong life. Not just strong physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. He saw God. He saw God spiritually. He saw God by faith.

He could see that the pleasures of this world were nothing to be compared to what he had available for him in God's provision of salvation. To the inheritance that God had prepared for his people.

What was Egypt? What were all the treasures of Egypt? What were all these riches? What was all the gold of Egypt compared to the indescribably valuable gold of eternal life?

You see, that's what Ecclesiastes is telling us too. The pursuit of pleasure, even that in itself, doesn't give you lasting happiness. But then you find, secondly, that in any case, that's invaded by death.

However much pleasure he was able to pack into his life, he still had this problem that death was going to bring it all to an end. And that's his question, well, what's the point?

[15:42] If at the end of the day there's nothing in it greater than death itself, nothing in it that helps me to deal with death, what's the point of it? So let's look at that problem of death.

Verse 12, you see what he's saying, I considered wisdom and madness and folly, only what comes after the king, only what has been already done. Then I saw there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, there is more gain in light than darkness, and so on.

Yet I perceived the same event happens to all of them. The problem of death means that death is no respecter of wisdom.

Yes, he's saying here wisdom is better, it's to be preferred than foolishness. He's making that very clear. There is more gain in wisdom than in foolishness, in light than in darkness.

And yet, he said, I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. The event of death. Death brings us away from all of the pleasures of this life.

[16:44] Wise people die, fools die. They come to the same end at the end of the day. You see verse 16 there, says, for the wise is as the fool, for there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.

You know, that's one of the difficult things for us to accept. People are going to forget us. Even some of the most important people who ever lived, they're forgotten. They're not known by anyone outside of a small academic minority of people, perhaps.

I mean, would many people, I should say, today, let's say under 30 years of age, know who William Wilberforce was?

Know what his achievements were? Know what he actually stood for in his life? Some probably would, but not many. See, that's what it's saying to us. There is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will be forgotten.

So death is no respecter of wisdom. The wise come to die just like the foolish. But it's no respecter of wealth either, verses 18 to 23.

[17:54] He talks there about his wealth and what he toiled for. And while wealth cannot make us happy, it's also the case that we can't keep our wealth.

We can't keep our material things. We live as if we could. We tend to look upon them as permanent possessions. What he's saying is when death comes, it takes us away from all of that.

However successful, however much we've had pleasure in life, death removes us from it. Not only that, he says, but we have no control whatsoever over what happens to what we've gathered after we are dead.

Even if we pass them on to members of our own family, we trust that they might make good use of them. We can't guarantee that. They might treat them foolishly. They might waste them.

They might do that with them, which we would abhor. We have no control of that. That's part of the examination, part of what he's looking at here as life under the sun. As he gave his mind to that, he said, well, this is also vanity.

[19:01] This is also just a striving after wind and a great evil, he says. We cannot control what happens after us, even if we would have a great desire to be able to do so.

Alexander the Great, apparently, that great emperor, Alexander the Great was at one time, just in the evening time, he went out to a field there and he saw Diogenes, who was a friend and a philosopher, standing in the field and he was looking at a heap of bones.

And Alexander went up to him and asked him, what are you doing? What are you thinking of? Why are you standing here? He said, I'm looking for the bones of your father, Philip.

Now, Philip was the one who started the Macedonian Empire, Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. This is what Diogenes said to him. I am looking for the bones of your father, Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves.

I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves. That's what life under the sun comes to. That's where we end up physically, in a grave, a pile of bones.

[20:25] And sometimes, you know, the Bible is so graphic and so blunt about things, because God knows that sometimes we need to be just caught up short, if you like, with the sheer impact of God's truth and the truth about ourselves.

There's a great Gaelic poem by Dougal Buchanan, one of the great Gaelic spiritual poets. It's called, in Clacken, The Skull. And he tells us that it happened one day, he was near a graveyard and he came across a skull.

And, of course, with his own ingenious mind as a poet and thinker, he began thinking about this skull. And the whole of that poem, which isn't a short poem, came from that experience.

And he began thinking in his mind, whose skull was this? And he gives certain possibilities. He's asking a skull, were you somebody important? Were you a king or a duke?

Did you treat people well? Were you a minister? Did you preach the gospel? Did you deny people the truth? And he goes through a whole list of possibilities there of who the skull might have

belonged to.

[21 : 42] And what he's really doing throughout the whole of that poem is just saying, where is the person whose skull this is now? What is the outcome of having lived under the sun?

What did he make of life? What happened when he came to meet with God? It's basically what he's saying. But you see, that's where we end up.

And however grand you might find a gravestone in a graveyard of any kind, and there are some very large gravestones in our cemeteries throughout the island, indeed throughout the world. It doesn't matter how grand that edifice is above the ground. Every grave below the ground is exactly the same. It contains people's bones.

No difference. No distinction. The king is on the same level as the slave, as Diogenes put it to Alexander the Great.

[22 : 48] Death invades our human space and our human life. And that's why the conclusion that he comes to in verse 19 to 23, that all of this under the sun is vanity and evil and sorrow and frustration.

Now this is a pretty gloomy picture. And it's deliberately so, because Solomon is looking for the meaning of life. And in order to come to that bright light of what is really, truly the meaning of life, he has to walk through all of these shadows and dark places.

He has to face reality. And if anything, it characterizes the book of Ecclesiastes, as indeed the whole of the Bible. It's a book of realism. It doesn't hide the truth from us.

It takes us through all of these difficult things that are true of ourselves in order that we might arrive at the truth. that we might arrive at that which is the true and proper meaning and purpose of life.

And that is in verses 24 to 26. Not that there isn't an element of frustration built into that as well.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

[24 : 04] This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. Now you see, he begins to mention God. He brings God into the picture. Not for a very long time, but still, he brings God into the picture here.

And we'll see he does more of that in chapter 3. And he's beginning to actually show us that life under the sun is completely inadequate to really bring us to the meaning of human life.

You have to bring God into it. What he's saying to us here, basically, is that we accept God's arrangement of our lives and give him thanks. And we come to enjoy the things that God has given us to enjoy.

He's not saying at all that the things that give us pleasure are wrong for us to possess. That the worldly things that we handle and use from day to day are improper for us to use in our lives.

Money, finance, so many other things that you find mentioned here. They're not wrong for us to possess. But what he's saying is, don't make the pursuit of them the meaning of your life.

[25 : 11] Don't live for them, even if you have to live by them. Don't think that that's what gives you happiness. Because without God, without Jesus, without Christ, you really can't have that.

We often mention or read at a time, or I do at least at a time, of funerals or wakes, the words of the Lord in Matthew chapter 6. These great passages that deal with the priority that we have to give to the things of God.

And you see in verse 19 there, for example, he says, where you find, do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, but lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where things don't corrupt, where they don't get stolen from you, where they're permanent.

And then he goes on to say, verse 25, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life. That's this present life. What you will eat, what you will drink, what about your body, what you will put on. And he goes on to say, these are the things the Gentiles seek after.

The pagan nations around the Jews at the time of Jesus. Jesus could say to them, that's what they live for. That's what worldliness is. That's what their pursuit of pleasure is about. In terms of enjoyment, in terms of worldly success.

[26 : 30] But he says, for you, you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things will be added to you.

You need to look above the sun. Everything we have in this life that's proper for us to possess is from God and is for God.

We live to glorify him. Not to make much of personal success or self-achievement or to pursue the pleasures of this life. But to glorify God.

That's what the catechism begins with, isn't it? What is the chief end of man? Why do we exist? What is the meaning of life? It is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. You see how different that is to the pleasures of this life? To enjoy him forever. In that great book Tom Brown's School Days you'll find an account there of different characters and you'll find that one of the characters is George Arthur.

[27 : 41] This of course is based on life in rugby school in England and it has a very Christian ethos to it as the writer actually said at one time.

But this fellow George Arthur became one of the friends of Tom Brown. He was a very sickly child and during his time of illness he was afraid that he would never be able to work like others like other people that he had seen growing up or like other men.

But one day he came to Tom and said I've had this dream and it's just it's just a wonderful dream it's made all the difference to me. This is what he said on the other side of the great river I saw men and women and children.

The tears were wiped from their faces all weariness and pain fell away and they worked at some great work. They all worked. Each worked in a different way but all did the same work and I saw myself Tom and even I was working and singing.

even I was working and singing. Not a great emphasis beyond the river on the other side. Even I who couldn't do much in this life he's saying even I was working and singing.

[29 : 06] Well as you see a world and live in a world that seeks the pursuit of pleasure a pursuit of pleasure that's invaded by the problem of death is it not going to be true of you too that you will say even I have an alternative to that.

Even I know what real happiness is and that happiness is in the Lord. May he bless this word to us again. Let's pray.

Lord our God we thank you for the happiness the joy the delight that you give to those who are saved. We pray that you would sustain us Lord through the dark things of this life by constantly giving us to draw from those wonderful pleasures that are at your right hand.

We give thanks Lord that during this life while we know of the gloom and the tragedies and the difficulties the struggles that we face while we face temptations while we also face times of despondency yet we give thanks that there is life above the sun that there is indeed with yourself that which is to be truly enjoyed.

We pray that today you would give us from that great store of your salvation that which would gladden our hearts anew. Confirm to us we pray that that path of faith and trust in you is the right path for us to follow.

[30 : 39] Give us today further indications of your own pleasure in us so that we might continue to serve you and be your people in this world. Receive our thanks we pray and pardon our sin for Jesus sake.

Amen. Well let's conclude our service today singing in Psalm 56 Psalm 56 on page 287 verses 8 to 13 My wanderings all what they have been thou knowest their number took into thy bottle put my tears are they not in thy book my foes shall when I cry turn back I know it God is for me in God his word I'll praise his word in God shall praised be.

So on to the end of the Psalm 56 from verse 8 My wanderings all what they have been. my wanderings all what they have been thou knowest their number took into thy bottle put my tears are they not in my book my foes shall when I cry turn back I know God is for me in

God his word I'll praise his word in God shall praise it be in God I trust I will not fear what man can do to me thy vows upon me ah O God I'll render praise to thee deserve de Sisterism from other ■■■ gener Dom be saved by

Will layer un o Dār the light of those that live in the I'll go to the door here to my right this morning and now may grace and mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore Amen