

Laughter as a Disguise for Emptiness

Ecclesiastes 2:1-2; Proverbs 17:22

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Laughter is a Divine medicine to the soul when used properly. It lifts the spirit and improves the health of the body. Many studies have been done showing the relationship of laughter to good health.

For example, Nicole Nisly, M.D. from the University of Iowa Hospital writes in her article entitled "Laughter Is Medicine from Within" (September 2003):

Laughter recently got a boost when researchers announced at an American Heart Association meeting last November that heart-healthy people are more likely to laugh frequently and heartily than those with heart disease.

The benefits of laughter go beyond heart disease. Laughter has been found to decrease tension and reduce pain. It also appears to boost the body's production of infection-fighting antibodies. Laughter even has the potential to help in the treatment of depression and other emotional illnesses.

God's people should be those who are unafraid to express their joy with laughter. Yes, there is a time to weep, but there is also a time to laugh (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

Solomon raises the matter of laughter for our consideration this Lord's Day. What role does laughter play in the life of a Christian? Are there any boundaries that we should set around our laughter? Will immersing ourselves in laughter bring contentment and peace of heart?

Let us consider this Lord's Day the following main points from our text: (1) Solomon's Experiment With Laughter (Ecclesiastes 2:1); and (2) Solomon's Conclusion Concerning Laughter (Ecclesiastes 2:1,2).

I. Solomon's Experiment with Laughter (Ecclesiastes 2:1).

A. By way of review, let us remember that in the last few verses of Chapter One, we saw how Solomon gave himself to a study of all the activities, employments, and pleasures of man from a mere earthly perspective of one who lives "under the sun." And all Solomon could discover by way of his thorough investigation was that all of man's activities were both physically and mentally exhausting, with nothing by way of true happiness to show for it. It was all unending activity and meaningless movement as it relates to finding a peace of mind and contentment of the soul that endures. King Solomon even investigated the value of worldly wisdom and perverse folly to see if true joy might come from a pursuit of these. But to no avail. Worldly wisdom had no superiority over perverse folly in bringing true happiness to man. A worldly wisdom only increased his grief and sorrow over not finding the joy that he so much desired.

B. Now Solomon turns in Chapter Two to various pleasures, which he personally investigated, in order to bring an enduring satisfaction and fulfillment into his life. The first pleasure in which Solomon immersed himself was that of mirth (or gladness) which issues forth in laughter. Perhaps Solomon reasoned from a mere earthly perspective as follows: "If any particular frame of mind might be geared toward enjoyment, it would seem to be that of outward glee and amusement. If tears and sorrow bring pain to the

soul, then laughing and feasting must bring joy to the soul.”

1. Solomon turns again to reasoning with himself about the place where he might find true joy and contentment: “I said in mine heart” (Ecclesiastes 2:1).

a. There is certainly nothing wrong with this type of self-talk wherein you carefully weigh the advantages and the disadvantages of a particular decision. This is precisely what a godly person should do. One who is godly will not run quickly into important decisions, but will rather meditate, reflect upon God’s Word and Providence, and will pray. Important decisions are not made rashly, but patiently. When making important decisions, we should debate and argue ourselves into the right decision by carefully weighing all of the advantages and disadvantages of that decision in accordance with God’s Word. The problem here occurs because Solomon is not using God’s Word to help give him direction, but is rather reflecting on what will bring him joy apart from a consideration of the Lord Jesus Christ and His revealed will. Solomon is thinking and acting as though God has nothing to say about the matter of joy and contentment in his life.

b. Dear ones, this is the starting point of Solomon’s defection from the Lord. He has forgotten the Lord and has left his first love. The Scripture tells us very specifically that when Solomon devoted himself to his idolatrous wives that they turned his heart away from the Lord his God (1 Kings 11:4). You can tell that you are heading for a fall away from the Lord, when Jesus Christ and His glory and when Jesus Christ and His Word are not in your affections, or in your thoughts, or in your decisions. When all that is important is that you get your own way, you have forgotten the Lord. You may even argue with yourself, that you are not being selfish, but are really thinking of what is best for everyone involved (what is best for the greatest number of people, which is simply the humanistic ethical system of utilitarianism). But dear ones, whether you are purely self-centered in your decision or whether you sincerely want what is best for the greatest number of people, you have begun to backslide, if Christ and His Word are not in your affections, thoughts, and decisions.

c. What is amazing about Solomon’s fall away from God is not only the fact that he enjoyed a greater measure of Divine wisdom than any other man (except Christ), but that he seems to have enjoyed such a blessed communion with Christ for the greater part of his life. For 1 Kings 11:4 states that when Solomon was “old” his idolatrous wives turned his heart away from the Lord. Furthermore, the loving marital relationship between Solomon and his bride in the Song of Songs beautifully signifies that blessed communion he and all believers enjoy with Christ by faith. What a warning to us all, that even though we have been faithful Christians for many years, if we allow our desires and the pleasures of this life to overwhelm us, we too will fall away from the Lord and reap the sorrow and grief that Solomon reaped. But the story of Solomon does not end on that note thankfully. For Solomon speaks in Ecclesiastes as the restored and repentant Preacher. Christ had surely gone after Solomon with an everlasting love, and by His almighty power rescued him from his rebellion and idolatry. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

2. What did Solomon say in his heart according to our text?

a. First he said, “Go to now” or literally “Go now” (Ecclesiastes 2:1). Solomon commands himself to go now, get busy, and be resolved in getting on with his investigation. This verbal phrase denotes a settled determination on his part. If true joy was to be found in partying and laughter, Solomon had set out to find it.

b. The second thing Solomon said in his heart is this: “I will prove thee with mirth” (Ecclesiastes 2:1). Solomon is saying here in effect, “I will test you, my heart, with gladness, festivities, and laughing to see whether your hunger after true satisfaction can be realized by these means.”

c. The third thing Solomon said in his heart is this: “therefore enjoy pleasure” (Ecclesiastes 2:1). Literally, Solomon said, “And see (or enjoy) thou with the good.” Let me unpack that for you.

(1) Just as Solomon had said that he had determined to prove his soul WITH

MIRTH (which includes gladness, amusement, and laughter), in order to see whether true joy might be found in them, so now he adds a command to his soul to see or enjoy itself WITH THE GOOD (namely, with mirth, amusement, and laughter). Solomon here calls mirth a “good thing.” In what sense did Solomon refer to mirth as a good thing?

(2) Now remember that Solomon is not evaluating that which is good from God’s perspective at this point, but from man’s perspective (as one from “under the sun”). Solomon calls mirth (or gladness, amusement, and laughter) good because he thinks mirth will bring him lasting joy and happiness. No doubt, there is a sense in which mirth, gladness, and laughter is good and beneficial to the health of even those who live their lives apart from God (as noted from the article to which I referred earlier in the sermon). But, dear ones, the mirth, amusement, and laughter of the world without Christ will not bring a satisfaction that endures forever. It will only bring such a person whistling to the brink of destruction, and then he will realize all too late that he has laughed himself all the way to hell and everlasting torment.

(3) Let us be clear that the Christian, according to Solomon in Proverbs 17:22, should be one who has a MERRY heart (“A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones”). The same Hebrew word used for MERRY in Proverbs 17:22 is here used for MIRTH in Ecclesiastes 2:1 (the only difference being that the word is used as an adjective in Proverbs 17:22 to describe a particular kind of heart, a MERRY heart, whereas it is used as a noun in Ecclesiastes 2:1). Thus, there is a godly mirth that we as Christians should know in our hearts. There is a godly laughter that we as Christians should express in our lives. What is the difference between a godly mirth and an ungodly mirth, or between a godly laughter and an ungodly laughter? Let’s first consider godly mirth and laughter, and then that mirth and laughter that is ungodly.

(4) Godly mirth and laughter, on the one hand, should be an expression of God’s goodness to us as God’s people (Psalm 126:2; Deuteronomy 26:11; 1 Timothy 6:17). When we see how good God has been to us, we must show our joy with gladness and laughter. Thus, times of celebration as at birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, weddings, promotions at work, or gatherings for fellowship should be filled with mirth and laughter, for by our laughter we should be giving thanks to God for all His undeserved blessings to us. Wine is said by God to make the heart of man glad in a godly sense (in Psalm 104:15,) as is likewise sweet smelling ointment and perfume (in Proverbs 27:9), where the same Hebrew word is used as in Proverbs 17:22; for these are all undeserved gifts from our gracious God that we are to use for His glory. That which is moral and upright brings godly mirth to the heart of man (as a wise son in Proverbs 15:20; Proverbs 29:2). Encouragement brings gladness and mirth to a soul that is stooped over with heavy burdens (Proverbs 12:25). Days in which God’s people gather to praise the Lord should be days of mirth and joy in the Lord (Nehemiah 8:9-12—the Feast of Trumpets; see also Deuteronomy 12:7—the bringing of the tithes to the Lord; Deuteronomy 16:11—the Feast of Pentecost). Likewise, our Sabbaths (each Lord’s Day on the first day of the week) should be days of gladness and mirth, which is why it became the practice in many Reformed Churches to avoid fasting on the Sabbath and to refer to the weekly Sabbath as “the market day of the soul”.

(5) Ungodly mirth and laughter, on the other hand, is that which is directed in derision against God, against God’s people, against God’s blessings, and against God’s Word (Psalm 22:7; Genesis 18:13; Proverbs 15:21). It is an ungodly mirth and laughter that is used in excess, or is used at inappropriate times (James 4:9). If we laugh at sins (whether in the form of course jokes, or sinful behavior in person or in movies), we are using an ungodly mirth and laughter. Dear ones, how much of the humor of the world (whether jokes on TV, or in movies, or at the workplace), either has the audience laughing with mockery at that which is righteous, or laughing with approval at that which is wicked? Laughter is a gift from God, but it must never be used to imply our approval of that which is immoral. We must not be entertained by that which is morally repugnant to God (profane or blasphemous speech which drags through the gutter that which is holy by way of coarse and filthy jokes, or lewd behavior). If we laugh with disrespect when we are justly corrected or disciplined by God or others, it is an ungodly mirth and laughter. It is also an ungodly use of mirth

and laughter to place in mirth, laughter, amusement, and pleasure our hope to bring us true joy and satisfaction.

(6) When we think that we can fill up the emptiness in our lives by merely introducing laughter or partying into our lives, we have deceived ourselves and have fallen into the same sin as did Solomon. Laughter is not an end in itself. If we make laughter an end in itself, we will find it to be a dead end. Laughter should be an expression of our enjoying God, enjoying God's blessings, enjoying God's people, and enjoying God's salvation. Not everything must be spiritual (in a narrow sense) before we can enjoy it. We can enjoy with much laughter playing with our children or grandchildren. We can enjoy with mirth various hobbies or lawful forms of recreation. We can enjoy (with gladness) whatever God has blessed us with (according to 1 Timothy 6:17). However, when mirth and laughter lead our hearts away from God, away from His commandments, away from a proper enjoyment and respect for God's blessings freely bestowed upon us, we have fallen into a sinful use of mirth and laughter.

(7) Doesn't the Lord Himself laugh at the wicked? Yes, it is true that God laughs at the wicked (according to Psalm 2:4). But it is clear that it is not with any approval of their sin, but rather with complete disapproval of their vain attempts to overthrow His Anointed One (Christ), whom He has seated upon His throne. Certainly, in the same sense we may laugh at the vain attempts of our enemies to overthrow the kingdom of Christ.

(8) How do we reconcile this godly mirth and laughter with what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:3?

(a) First, the mirth and laughter of the godly is not opposed to the sorrowful heart of the godly. There is no contradiction here at all. For there can be no true joy in the heart of the godly, if they do not first know what it is to mourn over their own sin and the sin of others. Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). It is through our sincere grief of sin that we are brought to see with a believing joy and mirth that our only hope in overcoming sin in our lives is Jesus Christ.

(b) The contrast in Ecclesiastes 7:3 is not between a godly sorrow and a godly joy, but between a godly sorrow and an ungodly mirth. For we see the proper contrast in verses 4-6.

(c) Thus, the true Christian religion is not filled with all gloom and doom. It is a religion to be taken seriously, because life and death, heaven and hell will stand or fall upon one's faith or unbelief in Jesus Christ. But Jesus came to bring life, peace, and joy to man, and to bring it more abundantly (John 10:10). He came to make our joy full (John 15:11). He came that we might enjoy all that He has created to a much more full capacity than any unbeliever is able to do (1 Timothy 6:17). God is not a kill-joy. Satan is the ultimate kill-joy, who brings on momentary laughter, so that people laugh themselves all the way to the lake of fire. Jesus Christ is the ultimate joy of man's desiring. To enjoy Christ is the only way to find true joy now and for all eternity. Let us not follow our sinful hearts to find joy, but let us know our Savior, commune with Him through His Word and prayer, cherish and practice His Word in our lives, and then we will have a truly merry heart.

II. Solomon's Conclusion Concerning Laughter (Ecclesiastes 2:1-2).

A. The conclusion to Solomon's thorough search into mirth and laughter (apart from communion with Christ) is the same as every other pursuit Solomon made to find joy: "this is also vanity" (Ecclesiastes 2:1). Dear ones, if the joy of the Lord is not your strength, you will not enjoy a godly laughter in anything else that you do. You will find what Solomon found: all such mirth and laughter is vanity, a mere vapor that is so short-lived and passes away so quickly, and what is left in the soul is simply that same vacuum or absence of true joy.

B. Solomon goes even further in stating the conclusion to his pursuit of true joy and contentment in verse 2.

1. First, to pursue laughter in order to find true joy is madness or foolishness. It is like starving oneself in order to fill the belly. Or it is like jumping into an icy river in order to get warm. For to pursue laughter in order to find true joy, only reveals to a man that he has not found true joy. Laughing that is separated from Jesus Christ is in effect laughing at the very chains that shackle you and enslave you to an eternity of hopelessness and helplessness in everlasting torment. One who can laugh at that which is immoral, profane, and sinful is mad (and insane), for he is laughing at that for which men will be tormented forever (without relief for even a second) in hell.

2. Second, to pursue mirth in order to find true joy leads nowhere. That is the point of the rhetorical question: "and of mirth, what doeth it?" What does mirth (apart from the joy of the Lord) accomplish in satisfying the soul of man? Nothing!

Dear ones, Solomon with his vast wealth had more opportunity to realize true joy, if it were possible to be realized by means of mirth and laughter. For he could afford to hire the best entertainers, the best comedians, the best plays, and he could afford to keep them coming 24 hours a day if he had wanted to do so. So many people seek to bury their sorrow, their discontentment, and their emptiness within, by filling their lives with entertainment, amusements, and laughter. All they are doing, however, is coming to realize more and more that true joy and lasting satisfaction is not found in these things. The world learns where true joy is not found, and that is why the world continues its search because it never is satisfied. However, the one who drinks of the water of life that is found in Jesus Christ learns that true joy is found only in Christ. The search is over. We have found it. Let us come daily to Christ to drink of the wells of salvation, joy, and peace that are in our Savior. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

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