

## **No Joy in the Pleasures of Taste or Sight**

Ecclesiastes 2:3-6; Psalm 104:15

January 30, 2005

Rev. Greg L. Price

There is a philosophy today that encourages people to grab for all of the gusto in life because you only live once. This world view calls for people to indulge themselves to the max because tomorrow they may die. “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” According to this worldly perspective, life is one big party. Those who imbibe this philosophy are free spirits—free UNTIL they lose their health, UNTIL they lose their job, UNTIL they lose a loved one, or UNTIL they lose their own soul in hell. They are free spirits as long as life goes the way they want it to go. Then the party ends.

Solomon is not writing in Ecclesiastes from the perspective of that world view. Although Solomon is carefully examining every good gift in this life to see whether true joy and satisfaction may be found in them, he is not overindulging himself to the point of a drunken stupor in order to find a lasting contentment. Solomon had indeed backslidden from the Lord in his worldly search for an enduring joy. However, as we shall see today, Solomon was taking a more moderate approach to the pleasures in this life. He wanted to enjoy every pleasure life has to offer, but to do so in a more controlled rather than uncontrolled fashion.

Dear ones, the Christian life is to be enjoyed. There should be no one that enjoys life more than the Christian. Only the Christian knows that true joy is found in Jesus Christ, who gives us richly all good things in this life to enjoy. Life is neither an uncontrolled drunken party nor a controlled dinner party. Life is Jesus Christ. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Paul wrote those inspired words while in jail for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Isolated, abandoned, and separated from family and friends, Paul had learned where true joy was to be found. It was not found in people, things, or dreams. It was found in a person—Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ alone for eternal salvation had brought Paul the grace to be content wherever he was. For no one could take Christ from him. Everything else in this life might be stripped away from Paul, but not Christ. Dear ones, death will rob us of everything in this life, but it cannot rob the Christian of Christ. Death only sends us into the very presence of Christ, where we will be free of all pain and suffering, free of all temptation and sin, free of all sorrow and tears, free of all fears and worries, and filled with more joy and contentment than any one of us has ever experienced in this life.

This Lord’s Day we continue our study through Ecclesiastes wherein Solomon continues to relate to us how he searched for joy and contentment in the things of this life. From our text this Lord’s Day, Solomon continues his search in two areas: (1) Solomon Searches for Joy in What He Can Taste (Ecclesiastes 2:3); (2) Solomon Searches for Joy in what He Can Build (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6).

### **I. Solomon Searches for Joy in What He Can Taste (Ecclesiastes 2:3).**

A. In Chapter One, Solomon related his investigation to find out the vanity that had befallen “the sons of man” in their search for joy. In Chapter Two, Solomon relates his investigation to find out the vanity that had befallen him in his own personal search for joy. In Chapter Two, Solomon thus embarks upon a study to find true joy in that which he himself can experience.

B. Remember that as Solomon writes Ecclesiastes, he writes as a repentant believer who has been driven by God’s Spirit to see the utter futility of everything in life apart from Christ. But as Solomon writes, he also is reflecting back on the many futile ways he sought to find true joy in the things of this life. This one piece

of information will be invaluable in understanding various passages in Ecclesiastes. For there are times in which Solomon writes as the backsliding believer that he once was, and other times in which he writes as the repentant believer that he now is. There are times in which he writes as the man that he once was who lived “under the sun” (and lived from a mere earthly perspective), and times in which he writes as the man that he now is who is living “above the sun” (and is living from a heavenly perspective). The key to understanding Ecclesiastes is to identify which Solomon is speaking: the backsliding Solomon or the repentant Solomon. For example, from the perspective of a backslider, he can speak of his work as vanity (Ecclesiastes 2:17); whereas, from the perspective of a penitent, he can speak of his work as good and from the hand of God (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

C. In Ecclesiastes 2:1-2, we saw how Solomon, as one who had fallen away from Christ, sought for an enduring joy in mirth and laughter, but to no avail. Solomon now turns his attention to more places in which he at one time believed he might find lasting contentment. The first place Solomon looked (as we see in Ecclesiastes 2:3) was in WINE, and no doubt, the best wine that could be found. Let me state what this wine was not, and then what this wine was.

1. The WINE Solomon studied, tasted, and drank was NOT MERE GRAPE JUICE.

a. There are some who would seek to build a case for total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages from an arbitrary interpretation of the Hebrew word for wine (*yayin*). I say an arbitrary interpretation of the word because these folks take the Hebrew word, *yayin*, and wherever it is used in a positive sense in the Bible, they interpret it to mean non-alcoholic wine (or grape juice). But wherever *yayin* is used in a negative sense, they interpret it to mean alcoholic wine. For example, according to this scheme, *yayin* is grape juice in Psalm 104:15 because it is a blessing to man. However, *yayin* is alcoholic wine in Genesis 9:21 because it led to Noah becoming drunk.

b. Dear ones, the burden of proof is on those who would make the same Hebrew word (*yayin*) to mean two different kinds of beverages, not on those who would understand the same word (*yayin*) to refer to one and the same beverage. For we ordinarily understand a word to mean the same thing in various contexts, unless it can be proven that it has two different meanings. But that is the very thing that has not, nor can be proven. This is simply begging the question or assuming the very thing that must be proved.

c. Furthermore, the different effects that wine has upon people (i.e. a blessing in some cases and a curse in others) depend not upon two different beverages, but upon whether people use it moderately or immoderately. In considering the erroneous and arbitrary view that the same word for wine (*yayin*) refers to two different kinds of beverages in the Old Testament, we might as well arbitrarily defend the position that the Hebrew word for food (*ma'achal*) actually refers to two different kinds of food: food that is a blessing (according to Psalm 104:14) and food that is a curse and leads to gluttony (Proverbs 23:20-21). Then follows this conclusion: Food that leads to gluttony is prohibited to us, whereas food that does not lead to gluttony may be enjoyed by us.

d. Finally, it should be noted that there is a Hebrew word that refers to the juice of the grape: *mishrah*. Interestingly, it is used only one time in the Old Testament: Numbers 6:3 (“liquor” of grapes, or literally “juice” of grapes). The fact that the word for the juice of a grape (*mishrah*) is only used one time in the Old Testament would indicate that God did not intend to refer to both grape juice and wine by means of the same word (*yayin*), for He could have easily distinguished grape juice from wine by using *mishrah* for the juice of grapes and *yayin* for alcoholic wine. Thus, I submit that the wine Solomon has in view here in Ecclesiastes 2:3 is alcoholic wine and not grape juice.

2. The WINE Solomon studied, tasted, and drank was not diluted with water, so that it was less likely to intoxicate.

a. Here again there is an arbitrary idea imposed upon the word for wine by some. According to this view, in cases where wine is commended as a blessing, it was alcoholic wine that was diluted

with water. However, in cases where wine leads to drunkenness, it was undiluted alcoholic wine.

b. Again the burden of proof lies with those who would make such an arbitrary distinction. Where does God teach in His Word that diluted wine is good, but undiluted wine is evil? If it is the alcohol that pollutes the beverage, there is still alcohol even in diluted wine. Thus, the problem has not been removed for these folks.

c. Moreover, diluted wine is still potentially intoxicating. One just has to drink more of it in order to get drunk. So the problem of wine leading to drunkenness is not removed by diluting it.

d. Finally, rather than God giving His approval of diluted wine and disapproval of undiluted wine, the opposite is actually the case. For we read in Isaiah 1:22 that diluted wine is a form of corrupting good alcoholic wine. In the previous verse (Isaiah 1:21), Jerusalem is corrupted by the murderers that live without judgment within her walls. The Lord illustrates the corruption of Jerusalem by two examples that follow in Isaiah 1:22: unrefined silver is dross (or corrupted), and diluted wine is likewise corrupted not improved. Thus, it is very unlikely that the diluting of wine was the practice in the Old Testament, wherever wine is commended as a blessing. Therefore, I submit that the wine Solomon has in view here in Ecclesiastes 2:3 is an undiluted wine and not a diluted wine.

3. Why spend the time I have spent on the matter of wine? Because there are those within the Christian Church that would refer to alcoholic wine or the drinking of alcoholic wine as sinful. Not only is it not sinful, it is commended when used moderately (Psalm 104:15; Ecclesiastes 9:7 and many other places). Dear ones, no material substance is evil in itself according to God. It is a matter of how it is used that makes it sinful (1 Timothy 4:4). If alcoholic wine may be condemned as sinful by man (and thus deny a liberty that is ours in Christ), so may any other material object in this world; for food, money, cars, sex, or guns can all be abused. However, that doesn't make the lawful use of food, money, cars, sex, or guns to be unlawful. We cannot allow man to be the lord of our conscience; for that is to allow man to usurp the rightful authority that God alone possesses. This is a grievous sin, and one for which we must repent.

D. So Solomon became an expert in wine in order to find true joy and happiness. Solomon says, "I sought in mine heart (or "I purposed in mine heart") to give myself unto wine." Most likely he became an expert in not only wine, but also in all delightful and pleasurable foods that might be tasted and enjoyed. Just as the Lord Jesus could use the word "bread" in order to represent all that our body might need in this life, when He taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily BREAD", so likewise Solomon might use the word "wine" to represent all that might delight the taste buds of man. In other words, Solomon was seeking to find joy in every kind of food and drink. He made the satisfaction of his palate an art form. He certainly had the wealth and riches to invest more into the culinary arts than anyone else would have been able to do at the time. If satisfying the tastes of a person would lead to true happiness, Solomon would surely have found it there.

1. No doubt Solomon enjoyed some of the most tantalizing foods and drinks. But the taste soon died and with it the joy he had while feasting upon those delights. Fine wines and sumptuous feasts illustrate all too well the fleeting nature (the vanity or literally "vapor") of all things in this life. Such things may bring a momentary sense of satisfaction, but they fade so quickly. As soon as one gets up from the table, the taste is gone, and one is looking for another table with wine and food, and then another table to satisfy him.

2. And dear ones, if it is in the sensual tastes of a man/woman that true joy is found, then I would suggest that only the rich can be truly happy, for only they can afford it. If true contentment is found in satisfying our appetites, then the poor can never know it. Joy and satisfaction are then out of the reach of most of us, for we cannot afford it. But such is not the case, for Solomon with all of his wealth was unable to find a lasting joy and contentment in wine and food.

3. Beloved, food is to be enjoyed, for God did give us taste buds, so as to distinguish various food and drink. However, food and drink are not to be worshipped, as if that they could bring us joy

and contentment in life. The Apostle Paul had learned to be content in all circumstances he faced (Philippians 4:11-12). He “learned” how to be content. It did not come naturally, but supernaturally, through the grace of God. What was the source of Paul’s contentment? Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Whether rich or poor, whether in plenty or in want, Jesus Christ was Paul’s life, joy, peace, and contentment. And so must Christ be our life and reason for living, if we would know joy, peace, and contentment. Everything else in life is a vapor. To build your life on your family, on your house, on your job, on your sensual appetites or pleasures is building your life on sand. When the trials of life come like a tsunami upon you, your life will be swept away. But if your life is built upon the almighty Rock (Jesus Christ), the trials of life will come, pain and suffering will come, but Christ will never leave you nor forsake you. Christ will uphold and defend you. Christ will fill you with a renewed hope, that though this life is passing away, a glorious heaven awaits you.

E. I want to point out from our text in Ecclesiastes 2:3, that there is no indication that Solomon over-indulged in wine to the point of drunkenness, or in food to the point of gluttony in his search for an enduring joy. For Solomon qualifies his use of wine with the words, “yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom.” In other words, Solomon used wise common sense in the way that he ate and drank. And so even though Solomon did not become a party animal, waking up in his own vomit from the “good time” he had the night before, yet he says that even in the moderate use of the very best food and drink, it was really still the case of him laying hold on “folly” and foolishness. Why? Because it was a vain attempt to find true and lasting joy in the things of this life. Solomon strikes out again in his worldly search for joy, and so will you, if you follow in the footsteps of Solomon when he was backslidden.

## **II. Solomon Searches For Joy In what He Can Build (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6).**

A. I will briefly summarize for you where Solomon next searched for a peace that passes all understanding. Upon seeing that the culinary arts did not satisfy him, he moved to architectural arts. Solomon moved from the beauty of the taste buds, to the beauty of the eyes. Solomon undertook great building projects, hoping to find an enduring pleasure in them. What did he do? “I made me GREAT works” (Ecclesiastes 2:4). He did not just build or plant, but whatever he did, he did it in a GREAT way. And also note that the “great works” that Solomon built, he built for himself and for his own personal pleasure and satisfaction. Carefully observe in verses 4-6 the emphasis on the word “me.” Literally, Solomon stated several times in verses 4-6 that these projects were made “for me” (“I build FOR ME houses” and “I planted FOR ME vineyards” in verse 4, “I made FOR ME gardens and orchards” in verse 5, and “I made FOR ME pools of water” in verse 6). This would seem to exclude the Temple of God from the building projects he had in mind here, for that was not made for Solomon, but for God. These various projects Solomon mentions here were not strictly made for humanitarian purposes, but rather for his own pleasure.

1. Solomon built great HOUSES (Ecclesiastes 2:4). In fact, his house or palace must have been some work of art. For it took 7 ½ years to build the House of the Lord, which was a glorious work of art and architecture in itself (according to 1 Kings 6:1,37,38). But it took 13 years to build his own house (according to 1 Kings 7:1). What a palace that must have been if it took nearly twice as long to build it as it took to build the Temple. Other building projects are also mentioned in 1 Kings 9:15-19.

2. Solomon also planted great VINEYARDS (Ecclesiastes 2:4). This was likely the source of the wine in which he took so much pleasure.

3. Solomon also made great GARDENS and ORCHARDS (or parks), wherein were planted many different kinds of trees (Ecclesiastes 2:5). Solomon’s love for such gardens and parks is alluded to in Song of Solomon 6:2.

4. Finally, Solomon made great POOLS (or ponds, and irrigation systems) in order to supply sufficient water for his beautiful parks in a fairly arid and dry part of the world.

5. In all of these building projects, Solomon took great delight. Solomon being among the wealthiest men in the world at that time, he could afford to develop the most beautiful buildings and gardens. Not only did Solomon have the money, but he also had the artistic abilities to design such works of art as well. Solomon was not a warrior like his father, David. Solomon was an artist who loved and appreciated beauty, and he devoted himself completely to losing himself in his art, in order to find true joy and satisfaction.

6. But again Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 2:11, that all that he found was vanity, emptiness, and fleeting thrills in all he accomplished. Many people in the world worship and bow down at the altar of art (whether it be the art of painting, the art of cooking, the art of building, the art of entertainment, the art of literature, or the art of music). But dear ones, there is no lasting joy or satisfaction in art. For the artist is never really satisfied with the finished product. For it could always be improved. Or someone else might always excel his work of art, and it thereby lose its glory. Moreover, one art project only increases the appetite to make something bigger and better the next time.

7. Like everything else in this world which God gives to us, art is to be enjoyed by us. But we can only enjoy art as God intended, when we first find everlasting joy in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Giver of all such good things to man. If we do not know the beauty of Christ's holiness and righteousness, the glory of Christ's mercy, love, and grace, or the splendor of Christ's knowledge and wisdom, we will never be able to truly appreciate the beauty of art in this world. For true beauty begins and ends with God. Because God is beauty, He gives us what is beautiful to enjoy in this life. But what happens when due to illness, poverty, persecution, or death you are not able to enjoy the beauty in the world? Are you confined to be destitute of all joy and satisfaction? Never! For, dear ones, everlasting joy and contentment are found in the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. Let me leave you with a couple matters to apply to your lives in closing.

1. We are tempted to lust in our hearts, to kill with our thoughts, to steal with our hands, to envy what belongs to others, to cower in fear before man, to do unnecessary work on the Sabbath, to break our covenants with God and our fellow man, or to worship the Lord in a way not appointed in His Word. However, not every temptation to sin is an allurement to enjoy something that is immoral. I would submit that a far more subtle temptation that is cast before our eyes is simply to look for that peace that passes all understanding or for that everlasting joy in the good things of this life. Dear ones, there is nothing wrong with enjoying our wine or food. There is nothing wrong with finding satisfaction in what we accomplish in this world. There is nothing wrong with finding delight in works of art, which we or others have made. The subtle temptation to us all is to think we can enjoy those gifts from God apart from first enjoying the God who has given them to us. To so lose ourselves in these good gifts that we forget the Giver of those good gifts is a subtle yet grievous sin. To do so is to make these gifts a god, and to expect from them what only God can give to those who trust Him and serve Him: namely an enduring joy. We can even worship the sacrament of Baptism when the grace of God depends upon the water, rather than upon the Spirit of God.

2. Until you can appreciate the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, until you can enjoy the beauty of God who loves unworthy, guilty sinners like you and me, until you are absolutely amazed at the beauty of God becoming man and suffering as no man ever suffered in order to redeem godless men who hated Him and despised Him, you will never really appreciate the beauty in this world. For, dear ones, if you cannot enjoy that which is most beautiful, namely Jesus and the gospel, you will never enjoy that which is less beautiful, namely works of art. Are you enjoying the beauty of the gospel? There is no greater work of art. There is nothing more beautiful than the gospel of Jesus Christ.