

Living a Meaningful Life

The Vanity of Self-Indulgence

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

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Scripture

It is good to be with you this morning. I have been out of this pulpit for about a month, and I am eager to direct our attention to God and his Word.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) once said, “Consider pleasures as they depart, not as they come.”¹ Aristotle wanted his students to consider the value and usefulness of pleasure after it had been enjoyed.

Interestingly, that is what the writer of Ecclesiastes did. The writer of Ecclesiastes, also known as “the Preacher” or “Qoheleth,” wanted to know how to live a meaningful life. He explored several areas of life in order to find the meaning to life. In today’s section, the Preacher explored pleasure and self-indulgence to see if that could provide one with a meaningful life. But, as we shall see, he discovered the vanity of self-indulgence.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11:

¹ I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with 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 their life. ⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and

¹ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 448.

gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ And 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, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

Introduction

Earlier this year I attended the Strawberry Festival in Plant City. Last year I attended the Florida State Fair in Tampa. Years ago I attended the Grange Fair near State College in Centre County, PA.

The Grange Fair began 136 years ago and, as I understand it, is the longest continuing Grange Fair in the country. Families literally bring the kitchen sink and set it up in one of the permanent tents on the grounds of the Grange Fair. It's grown into a real family tradition with some campers going back generation after generation. Tent sites are passed down to family members as prized possessions. The Grange Fair has grown to include 950 tents, 1300 RV's, hundreds of concessions, over 7,000 exhibit items, amusement rides, livestock, tractor pulling and much more!

Most of us have attended a fair at some point in our lives. When we were youngsters a day at the fair was very exciting. With hyper-active energy we would race from booth to booth in order to take in all the sights, sounds, tastes, and rides that our parents would allow!

Do you remember all the treats to eat? Snow cones, caramel apples, chocolate fudge, homemade ice cream, cotton candy, strawberry shortcake, chocolate covered bacon, and much more

was available, and somehow we managed to get a taste of it all.

And that was just the beginning. There was much more than just candy and treats. The fair was also a vast marketplace of homemade goods. From hand knit sweaters to patch quilts, from home-canned peaches to farm-churned butter, from carved wood figurines to kiln-baked candlesticks, the labors of a thousand hands were on display.

And so was the produce of the fields. From the pens and sheds behind the booths there sounded the chorus of the livestock. Mooing cows, braying donkeys, neighing horses, and bleating sheep all blended in a barnyard cantata. But it was not for their music that the animals were on display. It was the richness of the milk, the thickness of the wool, the squareness of the shoulders, the soundness of the legs that the judges inspected. White, red, and, especially, blue ribbons were the praise the farmers waited for.

At night the air was filled with entertainment—the rhythm of the square dance, the circling lights of the Ferris wheel, the crack of the target rifles, and especially the blazing, dazzling radiance of the fireworks. It was an evening worth staying up late for.

A cafeteria of pleasure, an emporium of entertainment the fair was—and still is in some towns. It offers in the confines of one place and in the span of a few days a summary of our human delight in food, play, competition, and achievement. For small boys and girls of all ages it was the highlight of the year.

I think that the Preacher would have enjoyed the fair. He would have understood the intrigue with which a fair can put its noose around our hearts and bind us to its attractions.²

Review

The Preacher, also known as Qoheleth, opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of

² David A. Hubbard and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, vol. 16, *The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 16 : Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The Preacher's Commentary series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1991), 69-70.

his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11). His theme is simply that *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”³ It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher’s theme is that everything in life is meaningless. However, the Preacher eventually gives a corrective. He says that everything in life is meaningless *without God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don’t live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

The Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless without God.

The Preacher first explored wisdom (1:12-18). He discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything from wisdom.

Next, the Preacher explored pleasure and self-indulgence (2:1-11). He tested it to see what depths of meaning he could find in self-indulgence. Again he put himself in Solomon’s place, mindful that no one else in Israel’s long history had greater power, wealth, and leisure to give the search for pleasure its full play.⁴

Lesson

In today’s lesson learn that apart from God, we will not gain anything from self-indulgence.

I. The Quest (2:1-10)

First, let’s look at the quest.

³ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

⁴ David A. Hubbard, 70.

The Preacher wanted to live a meaningful life. He now turned his attention to see if he could find meaning in life by self-indulgence. To this end he indulged in all kinds of ways. Let's examine what he tested.

A. *Pleasure (2:1)*

First, he tested pleasure.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:1a, **“I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’”**

He tells us what he tested. And, interestingly, he immediately tells us the result. He said in verse 1b, **“But behold, this also was vanity.”**

The Preacher summarized his conclusion at the start. He will continue to tell us all the different areas of self-indulgence he tested to see if any one of them provides a meaningful life.

J. I. Packer once said, “Pleasure seeking, as we learn from experience, is a barren business; happiness is never found until we have the grace to stop looking for it and to give our attention to persons and matters external to ourselves.”⁵

The Preacher eventually learned this, but for now let us continue to look at the other areas he tested.

B. *Laughter (2:2)*

Second, he tested laughter.

Laughter is a sign that we are having a good time and enjoying ourselves. And there is nothing wrong with that.

There is of course a difference between “having a good laugh” and “having a sense of humor.” Some people with the sharpest sense of humor actually do not laugh a great deal.

I don't know whether the famous author G. K. Chesterton laughed a great deal, but he certainly had a delightful sense of hu-

⁵ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2006), 448.

mor. He was a very solidly built man. One day he was walking down a London street, dressed in his famous cape-like coat. As he was about to turn a corner, he was knocked flat on his back by someone coming in the opposite direction who was carrying a grandfather clock! Chesterton was spread-eagled on the ground, but as he looked up and realized what had happened, his sense of the ridiculous and sense of humor took over. He said to the concerned young man carrying the grandfather clock, “Why can’t you wear a wrist-watch like everyone else!”⁶

But is laughter the meaning of life? Does laughter bring meaning and purpose to life? The Preacher did not think so. He said in Ecclesiastes 2:2, **“I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’”**

C. *Alcohol (2:3)*

Third, he tested alcohol.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:3, **“I searched with 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 their life.”**

This verse is actually somewhat difficult to interpret. It could mean that the Preacher tested alcohol by abusing it—as some do today. Or it could be that he tested alcohol by a controlled experiment. Either way—whether his use of alcohol was excessive or controlled—he was looking for the meaning of life while he still had time. The end of verse 3 introduces a theme that will become increasingly prominent in the rest of Ecclesiastes, namely, the brevity of life.

I think T. M. Moore has captured the essence of this verse in his translation of verse 3: “I resolved to cheer my body with wine, still seeking after wisdom, mind you, and to lay hold on revelry in

⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Pundit’s Folly* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 13-14.

order to see whether this might yield the good I was seeking. Perhaps, since life is so short, folly and revelry might be the meaning of it all? But no.”⁷

The Preacher tried to find the meaning of life by using alcohol, but he still came up empty.

D. Great Building Projects (2:4a)

Fourth, he tested great building projects.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:4a, **“I made great works. I built houses. . . .”**

E. The Planting of Vineyards (2:4b)

Fifth, he tested the planting of vineyards.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:4b, **“. . . and planted vineyards for myself.”**

F. The Creation of Beautiful Parks with Exotic Trees (2:5-6)

Sixth, he tested the creation of beautiful parks with exotic trees.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:5-6, **“I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.”**

G. The Accumulation of Possessions (2:7-8)

Seventh, he tested the accumulation of possessions.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:7-8, **“I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any**

⁷ T. M. Moore, *Ecclesiastes: Ancient Wisdom When All Else Fails: A New Translation and Interpretive Paraphrase* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 23.

who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man.”

The Preacher looked for the meaning of life in all kinds of pleasures. He had incredible wealth in order to build and buy whatever he wanted.

H. A Universal Reputation (2:9)

Eighth, he tested a universal reputation.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:9, **“So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.”**

The Preacher said that he enjoyed a great reputation. Moreover, he retained his wisdom.

And still, in all of that, he did not find the meaning to life.

I. Total Indulgence (2:10)

Ninth, he tested total indulgence.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:10, **“And 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, and this was my reward for all my toil.”**

There was nothing that he kept from himself. Because he was wealthy he was able to test everything.

II. The Conclusion (2:11)

But, notice the conclusion.

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 2:11, **“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”**

Every person in the world wants to live a meaningful life. People look for meaning in all kinds of ways, and one of the ways is pleasure. But they soon discover, like the Preacher, that this also is vanity.

Peggy Lee talked about that in her song titled, “Is That All There Is?” In the second stanza she describes her childhood experience of going to the circus:

When I was 12 years old, my father took me to a circus, the greatest show on earth. There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears, and a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads. And so I sat there watching the marvelous spectacle. I had the feeling that something was missing. I didn’t know what, but when it was over, I said to myself, “Is that all there is to a circus?”

Then Peggy Lee croons her famous refrain: “Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that’s all there is, my friends, then let’s keep dancing. Let’s break out the booze and have a ball, if that’s all there is.”⁸

Commentator Philip G. Ryken says, “Pleasure, pursued for its own sake, does not and cannot satisfy the soul.”⁹ We need to learn this lesson from the Preacher, or else learn it from personal experience, like the woman whom Rabbi Harold Kushner writes about in his book titled, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*. She married a successful corporate executive and bought her dream house in the suburbs. But now she “cannot understand why she goes around every morning saying to herself, ‘Is this all there is to life?’”¹⁰

Conclusion

And so the Preacher’s conclusion is that apart from God, we

⁸ “Is That All There Is?” by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, as recorded in *Peggy Lee’s All-Time Greatest Hits, Volume 1* (Curb Records).

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 51.

¹⁰ Harold Kushner, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters* (New York, NY: Summit, 1986), 17-18.

will not gain anything from self-indulgence.

God is not a spoilsport. He is not trying to take pleasure away from us but to give it to us. Once we learn how to find satisfaction in God himself, then all of his other gifts become the best and truest pleasures. Happily, we do not need to be as rich as the Preacher in order to live a meaningful life. We simply have to look at the world around us and know that this is our Father's world, and that everything comes to us as a gift from God.

A wonderful example of knowing the pleasure of God comes from the testimony of a poor Christian woman. Her name is so long forgotten that it is known only to God, but sometime in the eighteenth century she wrote these words of contentment:

I do not know when I have had happier times in my soul than when I have been sitting at work, with nothing before me but a candle and a white cloth, and hearing no sound but that of my own breath, with God in my soul and heaven in my eye. I rejoice in being exactly what I am—a creature capable of loving God, and who, as long as God lives, must be happy. I get up and look a while out the window. I gaze at the moon and stars, the work of an Almighty Hand. I think of the grandeur of the universe and then sit down and think myself one of the happiest beings in it.¹¹

Have you experience this kind of satisfaction? Like that godly woman, you were made with the capacity to be one of the happiest beings in the universe. But you will never find it by living for your own pleasure. You will only find it when you learn to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Set Apart: Calling a Worldly Church to a Godly Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 40.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher teaches us that apart from God, we will not gain anything from self-indulgence.

Teach us how to live a meaningful life by glorifying God so that we can enjoy him—and pleasure—forever.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.