

***“Who Can Satisfy My Soul?”***

***Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11***

The 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal once wrote, **“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”** Everyone wants to be happy. In every decisions, we’re seeking and gaining for happiness. That continual search for happiness, while never seeming to grab a hold of it is what Solomon gets at in the writing of the book of Ecclesiastes. And as he talks about this search for happiness, meaning, pleasure, hope – he reveals that our search *under the sun* is a vain one. In other words, we want happiness, but we’re never satisfied completely. So, right from the beginning of this book, the writer essentially asks, “What’s the Point?”

But let me get even more practical here. The quote by Blaise Pascal says that we don’t just want to know *why* we’re here. We believe that our meaning of life and happiness ought to go hand-in-hand. And you know what? Solomon seemed to believe that, too. That’s precisely where Solomon goes in the next several verses we’ll be studying today. As we read and work through these words of Pastor Solomon, we will see Solomon’s wrestling for meaning, and we will also see how these words yet again cause us to see the gain and joy found in the gospel. So, let’s read the entire text together this morning. Before we do, let’s pray together.

**12**I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13**And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. **14**I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. **15** What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. **16**I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” **17**And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. **18**For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. **2**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 gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Solomon believes that wisdom would lead us to meaning and that pleasure and meaning ought to go hand-in-hand. What I believe he discovers and concludes is that **Earthly wisdom and pleasure, without God, is vanity and joyless.**

You might hear that and think about all the delights that this world around us has to offer and you could be tempted to think, “What is this guy talking about?! He’s crazy.” But hear him out. Do you realize who he is? Verses 12 and 16 are written in part to compel you to listen to him. In verse 12, we read that he’s been king over Israel in Jerusalem. He has authority and he has wealth. He knows what it means to have what this world has to offer (and we’ll see that more as we move on in chapter 2). Then in verse 16, we read that he is also wise. He’s not just a little wise, but he acquired great wisdom. And his wisdom far exceeds those who were before him over Jerusalem. Now again, you could simply say, “Well, that’s not impressive. There were only two guys before him. But that’s not true. In Jerusalem, the Jebusites ruled for centuries before David conquered the city. Also, in Genesis 14:18, we find that there was a very wise man and ruler named Melchizedek who ruled there. Think about this statement. Did you ever have a teacher grade on a curve? I had it rarely happen, and I was grateful for it because I usually wasn’t the student who got the high grades. When there was a curve, there was hope that I could get a better grade – unless there were several who got high scores, then the curve could be pointless *unless* the teacher threw out the high scores. Think of Solomon talking about grading on a curve. Solomon is saying that in all the lineage of rulers in Jerusalem, if you graded on a curve, his score would have to be thrown out because he far surpasses the rest.

In addition to this, I think it’s helpful to note that Solomon didn’t come to this knowledge in a moment. While the Bible tells us that God gave him this superior wisdom, we recognize in Ecclesiastes that Solomon gained more insight over time and through experience. The way he writes in these verses also almost sound like Solomon is aged. It’s as though he’s looking back on life and expressing his findings and maybe even his regrets.

So, having said this, if you want to be wise, you ought to at least listen to what Solomon has to say: earthly wisdom and pleasure is vanity and joyless. Solomon gives us at least three reasons why this is the case. We will see two of those reasons in chapter 1. Those reasons are “earthly wisdom cannot change what is set by God” and “earthly wisdom increases sorrow.” Then when we get into chapter 2 we’ll see a multiplicity of reasons all bound up in a third reason: “earthly wisdom reveals the vanity of hedonism.”

In these concluding verses of chapter 1, Solomon uses a certain type of structure to help to make his point. His structure looks like this: reflection, statement, and proverb. This makes it easy to see that he has two primary points in chapter 1. In addition to the structure of these verses, I think it can be helpful to know that these verses take us into a new section of Ecclesiastes. From 1:12 to 2:26, we find Solomon discussing the theme of wisdom from his own personal experiences. The words related to “wisdom” are used 23 times in this section. In addition, God is now mentioned, but he’s mentioned in a specific way. “God” comes up three times at the beginning of this section and three times at the end of this section. In between Solomon’s mentioning of God are his statement of how he tried to view life apart from God and how living life apart from God is vanity. Now that we understand these things, let’s get Solomon’s point: earthly wisdom and pleasure is vanity and joyless. Why? Because. . .

1. **Earthly wisdom cannot change what is set by God (vv. 13-15).**

The reason I say *earthly* wisdom is because of the context of Solomon’s writing. In what is to come, we’re going to see Solomon share some very sinful actions on his part, and yet he’ll say that he kept his wisdom. I don’t believe that means he was walking in the truth and fearing the Lord in those moments. This word for wisdom in these verses is the broad Hebrew term. I agree with one man by the name if Phil Ryken who writes, “Here it refers to what human beings can learn about the world without any special revelation from God” (Ryken, p. 38). This word “wisdom” then is talking about the *highest human wisdom –* his wisdom. And in verses 13-15, he says that this wisdom cannot change reality. It can’t change what God has set in stone.

Solomon starts with his reflection in verse 13: **13**And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.[[2]](#footnote-2) When he uses the words “seek” and “search” together, he’s using it to emphasize his absolute diligence. He didn’t just think about a couple of scenarios, but he evaluated *everything.* He didn’t just sit around and watch a sitcom and say, “Well yeah maybe we just are meant to ask questions the rest of our life.” Instead, Solomon pursues the questions. He went head-on with them and wouldn’t stop. But then he says something potentially shocking. He says it is an unhappy business that God has made us busy with. Get *every single word.* Solomon is meticulous in searching out the meaning of life and he’s meticulous in his findings.

Here we have the first mention of God, and Solomon says God has given the children of man an unhappy business to be busy with. What is that business? I believe he’s referring to trying to figure out the meaning of life by earthly wisdom. But wait a second, why is Solomon blaming God here? Hopefully I can answer clearly. Do you remember me mentioning how Solomon continually refers back to the Garden of Eden? We have the Hebrew word for vanity spelled like “Abel.” We have Adam show up in poetry already and then we have “man” here as well. In addition, instead of Solomon talking about Yahweh, he uses the general term for God: Elohim – which is mentioned in Genesis. Now, tell me what happened when Adam and Eve sinned? Answer: all creation suffered the effects of that sin and treason against God. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:20 that **“the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it . . . .”**[[3]](#footnote-3) Did you hear that? The entire created order is subjected to futility (or, vanity) because God subjected it all to a curse. Even our earthly wisdom, left to itself, cannot figure everything out or know the answer to the ultimate questions. Instead, we need rescue from this fallen order. And that’s where Paul does go in Romans 8:21. He says, **“the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”**[[4]](#footnote-4) Did you hear that? Paul says that those who are children of Elohim and not children of Adam will be set free from the futility. And Solomon clearly states that we aren’t made children of God because we’ve garnered all the earthly wisdom possible. Instead, God has left mankind with questions that they will not answer on their own. And, apart from God, that wisdom is miserable.

Now, Solomon goes on from this reflection to his statement in verse 14: **14**I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.[[5]](#footnote-5) This statement is further clarified in his poetry in verse 15: **15**What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Notice that “striving after the wind” is a new phrase. In some ways that phrase could relate to when people say something like, “It felt like herding cats!” Try to herd cats! Solomon is saying, “Try to catch wind. It blows in whatever direction it wants, and you can’t contain it in order to control it. This idea of wind potentially is what Solomon is referring to even when he gets into verse 15 and talks about what’s crooked. Think about a tornado. Some call them *twisters.* The wind has been twisted. Do you think you can grab that twister and straighten it out? Good luck!

Solomon says that you can expend all your mental energies in trying to solve the great questions with earthly wisdom, but it’s like trying to capture a tornado. Or, put another way, he says it’s like having a mathematical problem that doesn’t add up. We even say things like this, “Life isn’t adding up.” But somehow 3+5=10 and we don’t know how that could be the case.

Have you ever felt that way? Recently I was talking with someone about these struggles in life and how Scripture gives so many answers, but then I said something like, “Yeah, but try to tell someone who is suffering *why* it happened, and you come up short.” Do you have an earthly answer that’s going to appease someone? When our friend’s five year old son has cancer and it’s probable he will die as a child, do we just say, “Chin up”? When a tsunami takes the lives of hundreds or thousands, does your wisdom make it all better and keep tsunamis from ever happening again? What about earthquakes? Listen, we can study all we want, but even if we reduce events, either new things happen or all we can do is answer why something *will* happen – we can’t keep it from happening again. Our wisdom cannot stop the futility around us.

So, in the end, Solomon says that if earthly wisdom can’t address these things, what’s the point? It’s vanity. But he also says that earthly wisdom and pleasure is vanity and joyless because . . .

1. **Wisdom increases sorrow (vv. 16-18).**

Here’s his reflection: **16**I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Then having acquired all of this, we hear his statement: **17**And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Solomon turns from earthly wisdom and then moves to evaluating morality and immorality. When he says madness, he’s not talking about insanity, but instead immorality. So we have immorality and foolishness in comparison to a wise way of life. Solomon says that this is like striving after the wind. In the end, Solomon both sell you short. Neither give you what you long for.

Now this is kind of an odd statement isn’t it? I mean, don’t you think that morality is better than immorality? In one sense it most definitely is. God has created everything and every human being has some code of what is right or what is wrong – even if their conscience is defective in certain ways. But you can do sociological studies to find what is most beneficial for human beings. So, why does Solomon say that morality is like striving after the wind? He says that because he recognizes that even if you’re the most moral person in the world, you’re still going to have longings. You’re still going to realize that you haven’t achieved all you want.

There is such practical knowledge in what Solomon is purporting here, Ventura. In this world, we have the notably immoral and the obvious moral. You have people who say, “Do whatever feels right,” and the people who say, “Control your feelings and just do the right thing.” And these statements come from unbelievers. But even we as Christians can tend to think the moral person is the godly person. We tend to think that you can only be nice and moral if you’re a Christian, but that’s not true. All men seek happiness and they use various means to find it – through immorality and morality even.

Solomon says that whatever path you take, you won’t get the happiness you’re looking for. But even more specifically, it’s as if Solomon is saying that you could be a sociologist and figure out all the right answers of what to do and what not to do, that’s going to drive you to immense sorrow. Look at his poetic statement in verse 18: **18** For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.[[9]](#footnote-9) It’s not only through looking at suffering and realizing we can’t keep the futility of the fallenness around us away, it’s through looking at sin and how people behave that is extremely saddening. Isn’t that the truth? Look at the news and you hear about murder after murder. Mass shootings are on the rise, happening now about every two months in America. Addictions abound. Then we have stories of domestic abuse and human trafficking. Tack on lurid relationships and STDs, and this only scratches the surface. Then you have people martyred for their faith or Christians being tortured in other countries. You see pictures in Voice of the Martyrs and yet you don’t even want to look. We understand why people say, “Ignorance is bliss.” These situations make us want to go back to a child-like innocence. But the longer you live life, the more you realize that leading a moral or immoral life does not guarantee any type of eternal meaning.

As a result, being the wisest person from an earthly perspective – being able to write all the sociological books on the topic, being the top psychologist, will only lead to greater sorrow. And if you’re honest, you realize all your great knowledge won’t stop these things from continuing. Earthly wisdom falls short.

But maybe wisdom needs a little twist to it. Maybe instead of just being wise and being a person who’s trying to evaluate something, maybe life needs to be spiced up a bit. Maybe Solomon is just being one-sided in his study. If he really wants to be zealous in his pursuit of wisdom, then he needs to evaluate pleasure. And that’s the third point we see this morning.

1. **Wisdom reveals the vanity of hedonism (vv. 1-11).**

Hedonism refers to a love of pleasure. And we see in these verses an obsession for pleasure and excessive idolatry on Solomon’s part here. In these 11 verses, Solomon (I believe) uses 39 pronouns to refer to himself. This is what I call his pursuit excessive and an obsession. But this is precisely how many people think today. They do all that they do in order to make themselves happy.

I remember years and years ago watching the Disney channel, and there was some kind of commercial where kids were talking about doing community service and when they were talking about it, one said that they did it because it made them feel good about themselves. So, question, what if it doesn’t make you feel good about yourself, should you just let the trash lay there? This type of counsel is pervasive in our day, but it masks itself as very feel-good. In addition, we often think we need to escape from reality in order to be happy, and so many people will turn to good gifts of God and turn them into gods. Meaning, they’ll turn to these things for ultimate comfort.

This is what Solomon evaluates here, and he gets into four broad categories of pleasures we run to in order to find meaning and happiness in the midst of our struggles in life. For a mental picture, let’s think what Solomon is describing here as an interview with the wealthiest, most successful and smartest and popular man alive. This interview will be taking place at one of the homes of this man. Each area of his property speaks to the various pleasures these man indulges in. So, we need to take a look at each room because within the parlor, the garden, the treasury and the bedroom; we see a man full of pleasure and lacking meaning.

As we’re in the parlor, there’s laugher, wine and music. What’s not to enjoy in this setting? It’s all pleasurable. Start with laughter. Laughter is medicine for the soul, isn’t it? It’s a good thing to laugh. But I don’t think Solomon is talking about a joke here and there. In all that he’s writing about, he’s talking about an excessive amount. He’s talking about looking to these things in and of themselves to give us what we’re longing for. Is laughter going to do that? No. Yet, even in our day, comedy and watching comedic shows or listening to a comedian or getting together with a friend to make you laugh – all of these things are sought after because we need to escape life. So we watch a show or listen to a comedian, but what happens after the 30 minutes or maybe 2 hours of the show? Back to reality. It doesn’t do anything to change anything. That’s why Solomon says this is crazy. You listen to someone crack jokes to change life and it doesn’t work.

Even in our day, it seems like we’re going to an extreme with our joking. As a father, I’m personally concerned by how conclusions to cartoons are that we just need to laugh instead of be so serious. But that’s a pendulum swing in our culture. Listen, sometimes we need to be sober. Sometimes we need to laugh. In all of life, we should be serious. Life isn’t a trifle. It’s not a joke.

Ok, but what about drinking? Again, same results. But here we can tend to think that Solomon is just talking about casual drinking because he said that his heart was still guiding him with wisdom. But he says that he wanted to cheer his body *and* lay hold of foolishness. That sounds like drunkenness to me. Even his depressing statement of how he wanted to see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life seems to indicate a “what’s the point, let’s just drink up” kind of attitude. In addition, if wisdom here still refers to an “under the sun” kind of wisdom, Solomon is simply saying that he’s trying to see if he can figure out anything new in this venture. Does drinking and getting drunk give him what he longs for? No! So, what’s the point?

In this parlor, we also have singing. At the end of verse 8, we read that he had singers, both men and women. This actually would have been a phenomenal treat. In the temple, they only had male singers, but Solomon can have both. And in a day when music wasn’t readily available on call, Solomon could have it any time. In thinking through just these three things, one man said that **“Solomon’s private pub is alive with deadly frivolity. Another song is sung. Another round is served. Another joke is told”** (O’Donnell, p. 45).

As the interview continues, we go into the garden. In verses 4-7 we can *see* the eloquence of his estate: **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.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This estate would be featured in Better Homes and Gardens or HGTV or some science channel. He would be in articles for Forbes. He’s an arborist. He’s an inventor. He’s a businessman. What beauty can be found in Solomon’s estate! What he has here as what a man named Derek Kidner describes as **“a secular Garden of Eden . . . with no forbidden fruits”** (Kidner, p. 32). Why Garden of Eden? The verbs “to plant,” “to water,” “to make” are all found in Genesis 2 – as well as “garden” and “all kinds of fruit trees” (see O’Donnell, p. 46). But where is God in this Garden? He’s nowhere to be found. Instead, we see why Solomon made all of this. He says he made them for himself. All of these things were for him to make *him* happy. All the slaves and jobs that were needed were simply for his own personal benefit. Yet, he not only got all these things, but he got them in abundance above anyone else.

Before we’re disgusted at this, I want you to think about you. As you watch television or peruse through magazines with people who have these things, I know that I can become envious or I can think, “Wow, I just want to go there for one day.” Have you ever thought to yourself, “Well, it’s not a *sin* to have that,” but in reality you’re looking to that thing to rescue you – whatever it may be? Do you believe the American Dream can satisfy and will you fight for that? Honestly, I can’t imagine what I’d think of Solomon’s estate. I imagine I’d say it’s beautiful, but I hope I wouldn’t think it’s what I *need.*

Yet it’s tempting to think it’s all we need! And Solomon wants to emphasize even more of what he has. He moves into the treasury. He gathered silver and gold and he also received (or took) gold from other kings and provinces. But clearly the gold wasn’t enough. Even though he had greater wealth and business smarts that Steve Jobs. Even though he had the acclaim of a nation – and musicians sang in person for him. Even though he was a phenomenal, unhindered inventor – he still wanted more. So now we move from the treasury to the bedroom.

In 1 Kings 11, we read of Solomon wanting many women even though God told him not to do so. In verse 3, God says, “**3**He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Verse 8 of Ecclesiastes 2 simply says he got many concubines. He doesn’t even mention the wives. I think it’s to express that he had totally given himself over to please himself. Even the word for concubine is related to the word for “breast.” Some translators even translate what Solomon is saying here as “many breasts” in an effort to express the crude reference here. Listen, Solomon isn’t white-washing what he did. I tend to wonder if he’s now looking back on life and coming to his senses. He used women only for sexual pleasure. What did he get? He ignored God in his Garden of Eden and instead of taking one woman and sacrificing for her and loving her, he took a thousand.

And what did he gain? Solomon says in verse 9 that he became great and he also still desired to learn more and more. He took all he wanted and didn’t stop. He even says he found pleasure in all of his work. He did get something. But then he sat back again and wondered about all he received, and in verse 11 says, “**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.”[[12]](#footnote-12) No real gain. All he proved was an insatiable craving for more. Did any of that satisfy his soul? No, he felt his life was vanity.

Now, what about us? We can look at Solomon’s life and think, “Well, I’m not Solomon, and I’m not living like that,” but I think we have a lot in common with this guy. You might not have 1,000 women in your home, but the internet (with a click of a button) can give you hundreds of thousands. We might not have as much money as Solomon, but I think our couches and cars are much more impressive than even some of the items he had. In our culture, for us, we can get food so easily and while it costs, many of us can purchase things that taste quite delicious. And, alcohol can be abused with ease.

In addition, we fill our lives with laughter and excitement and pleasure with every movie and television show. Kids play video games and think its real life. People watch TV that has high stress. Then people come to church and want all those feelings. If those feelings are there, great! If not, bad sermon. But if there were feelings (and maybe even no repentance), people think it’s ok because after all, in the movies and TV shows and video games, you don’t really have to do anything, so what’s the difference with the Bible?

We need to wake up and look around. I pray that God allows us to see that the things of this world will not satisfy. Moses came to a similar conclusion as Solomon. He grew up in Pharaoh’s house and in Hebrews we’re told that he chose “rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Why would he do that? And better yet, is there anything else worth living for? Is there a better option than all of these things?

This is where Ecclesiastes moves us to the gospel again, and through the gospel message we see that **God’s wisdom (Jesus) is eternal gain and joy.** In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says, “**22**For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, **23**but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, **24**but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Do you see that? Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God. That means that Jesus himself is not merely wise – he is wisdom. Everything that matters comes by and from him.

Why? Because unlike Adam, he was tempted by Satan with the lust of the flesh, eye and pride, and Jesus denied those things. Instead, he did God’s will and lived for God’s glory. Instead of taking on fleeting pleasures of sin, we’re told that for the joy set before him, he endured the cross (see Heb. 12:1-2). And what joy is being talked about there? The joy of reigning at the right hand of God in fellowship as the God-Man and then forgiving and reconciling people to God!

But what does this have to do with meaning and happiness? Psalm 16:11 says that in God’s presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore! Do you hear this? Meaning and happiness go together, but God doesn’t just want us to have some type of limited pleasure in this world. He wants us to have eternal pleasure – pleasure that supersedes all, pleasure in him.

When we grasp Jesus and know his love for us in forgiving us of our treason in living godless, man-centered lives, and when we grasp that God is our delight, then we can actually enjoy the gifts of this world. First Timothy 4 even commands us to receive God’s gifts with thanksgiving. But we enjoy them as gifts, not as gods. Therefore, because of Christ, we can grow in obedience to his commands. We don’t need excessive sex, drunkenness, trite joking, money, power, houses. We can kill those idols because Jesus smashed those idols by his love on the cross! Believer, are you living out those realities by the grace of Christ or have you gone back to earthly wisdom?

Do you see? **Earthly wisdom and pleasure falls short. But Christ is eternal wisdom and joy. He satisfies our souls. And someday those of us who are Christ’s will someday be in a greater Garden where the dwelling place of God is with man. The foliage, the grandeur, the architecture will be more magnificent than the eye can see. In that place, there will be no more sorrow. There will be fullness of joy. We will be with God *forever.* This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.**

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