

The Pursuit of Pleasure

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Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, 24-26

In my last message on chapter one, we saw how the author of Ecclesiastes introduces a few key themes that will be used throughout the book – the sense that life is like vapour, limited, and fleeting, how we work hard for many things that don't last, and how all things “under the sun” (meaning things on earth, without God) have little lasting value. Today, we read from the 2nd chapter. Here, the author (The Evangelist) talks about how even those who become wise eventually end up dying just like those who are foolish. And, those who work very hard to build and create good things in the world will also eventually die, and someone who did not work so hard can end up receiving it all.

I'd like to focus on the first part of the chapter. Here, the Evangelist reflects on the pursuit of pleasure. He does an experiment to test out the benefits of seeking pleasure and self-indulgence. I can identify with seeking pleasure. How many of us have not got caught up in seeking our own pleasure? In our world, commercials on TV, and advertisements all around us encourage us to seek out our own pleasure. Various products promise to provide the pleasure that everyone “needs.” Yet, everyone knows that you can't just buy happiness, and that the best things in life are free. We know that we may be happy with one thing, but then the happiness soon fades, and we're longing for the next thing. But, that doesn't stop us from sometimes dreaming about having enough money to buy more of whatever we need or want. I often see people lined up at the lottery window, paying money for even a slim chance to win more money. For many, there is a temptation to play pachinko, or gamble, in the hope of winning big.

A lot of people find pleasure in buying things for themselves, but the excitement often wears off. As a kid, I spent a lot of time trying to make money, so that I could buy whatever I wanted. Even at age 9, I would sometimes go door to door selling things. I'd make enough money to buy things I wanted, like a new camera. But then, I would soon decide I want something different than what I'd bought, so I would look to the next thing to buy. I'd then make some money selling things I didn't want anymore (like my old camera) to one of my three younger brothers. My parents often scolded me for charging them too much! I always felt I was giving them a good deal, though. I spent a lot of time focusing on big things that I wanted to buy, and I was excited to earn money. I was seeking pleasure in gaining money and saving up to buy things, but the feeling of happiness was always just temporary.

With his test on the benefits of seeking ones own pleasure, the Evangelist begins and ends with a declaration that it all “vapour.” There is no substance if pleasure is our goal. The joy of all the pleasures anyone can imagine is fleeting, like vapour. The Evangelist must have been very rich, since he was able to afford anything that he wanted. In verse 3 he starts by “cheering his body” with wine to see if alcohol helps him. Here, we don't get a sense that he is overdrinking. He explains that he tests the wine, with “my mind still guiding me with wisdom...”. It is a part of his careful experiment to see what is “good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.” He's also acknowledging the fact that life is relatively short.

The Evangelist lists many things he built, houses, gardens, irrigation systems... And, he bought many slaves, livestock, singers, and treasures. In biblical times, kings would often boast of their many building projects and possessions. Here, the Evangelist boasts that he even surpassed all who were before him. In verse 8, he talks about gathering for himself “silver and gold and the treasure of kings”.

In verse 10 he declares, “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.” In the end, he repeats the same themes seen throughout the book. What did he get for all his toil? “All is vapour and a chasing after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

In the conclusion of the chapter, though, the Evangelist gives us hope, encouraging us to find pleasure in God. “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy...”,

Still, this has a limit and is like vapour in our lives. Our joy is never complete until we are in heaven with God. So, we can find meaning in our lives, and deep pleasure, but only when we have our focus in God.

So, how do we usually think about pleasure? Our understanding of life's pleasures may change as we get older. It's been said, "In youth the absence of pleasure is pain; in old age, the absence of pain is pleasure." Everyone values comfort in life, and we all look for ways to enjoy ourselves. I believe we often misplace our search for pleasure. When he saw the many things he could build and create, the Evangelist found pleasure in his work, even though it was limited pleasure. The pleasure found in work, had little meaning, unless it had God at the centre. Is your greatest pleasure in God, in following Jesus Christ? If not, where is your goal? Our challenge is to be careful that nothing takes the place of Christ. One of the 10 commandments is that we are to have no other gods before the one true God. Throughout our lives we will regularly need to repent and put God back to the number one spot.

There are so many things that give people temporary enjoyment and satisfaction in their lives, but they may be missing the focus of true pleasure found in a deeper relationship with God, in Jesus Christ.

C. S. Lewis sums it up best when he says "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to continue to make mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant to be offered a vacation at sea." That summarizes it. We are too easily satisfied. We are satisfied to play with mud and [God] says I have a 12-day cruise to the Mediterranean waiting for you and you are going to stay [here] on the pier and play in the mud. That is how ignorant we are.

It's easy to fall into thinking that if we just had enough finances to live comfortably, we'd no longer need to worry about anything. Yet, there is always something new to worry about. Some of the most fearful people are those who are rich. We may worry about not having enough, but when we do have enough, we start to worry about losing it. In today's scripture, the Evangelist shows us that even if we go to the extreme in satisfying our search for pleasure for ourselves, even if it includes building and doing things for other people, if God is not a part of our focus it will be just like vapour, and our pleasure won't last. It's easy to become deceived and miss the true pleasure of functioning as God created us, and receiving life and blessings as gifts from God.

Hard work and even suffering can be good, if our main focus is finding pleasure in following God's will. Often the way to true pleasure in God runs through sadness and suffering. But, life is like that. Sometimes we make sacrifices with a vision that in the long run we'll receive a reward. It's just like having surgery. It's uncomfortable, and maybe painful, but the hope is that in the end, after the surgery, our health will improve. As a young adult, I remember preparing for a major piano exam. In the final week I was practicing 6 hours a day in preparation. I sacrificed my time and effort, but I was looking forward to the pleasure of receiving qualification as a pianist. Through my life, I've had many different goals, but I have come to think more and more that it is important to experience a relationship with Christ through prayer, reading the Bible, and fellowship with other believers.

The early Anabaptist/Mennonite followers of Christ often looked beyond worldly pleasures to the pleasure of following Christ, even to the point of death. Many became martyrs for their faith. Thankfully, we live in a safe country where we are free to express our ideas and faith. My life isn't in danger, yet I even hesitate to just share an opinion that may cause someone else to be irritated because I disagree with them. It's easy to try and protect myself, keeping a comfortable space. My wife, Rie, often challenges me saying I'm too satisfied, living my life comfortably, and hesitating to take challenging steps in trust of God is leading. I think she's right. I pray that I may grow in courage to step out and follow God's call, seeking the ultimate pleasure of a deeper relationship with Christ rather than just being content with praise from people.

In Hebrews 12 it says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the

race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus left the joy of being with God in heaven, and came down to earth to live as a vulnerable human being. He endured persecution, and was hung on a cross to die, yet he could look beyond this to the joy of what that sacrifice would mean for all humanity. God raised Jesus to life, and he is now Lord of all. Through him, we have a renewed relationship with God. From start to finish, Jesus’ pleasure was focused in God. The joy of God sustained him through his life on earth, and through the horror of the cross. May we too focus on finding our pleasure in a closer walk with God, wherever that takes us. Looking to God, I’d like to close with Psalm 16:11, “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Amen.