

Ecclesiastes 2

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much Gethin. A man told the story of how he'd only lasted five minutes in a shopping centre! But it wasn't out of boredom or being in the wrong shops or being dragged around by his wife.

He'd just come back from a second tour of Iraq and at home he'd been haunted by images of what he'd seen in other places in the world. He couldn't last among the heaps of stuff being sold and being bought in the aisles of the shops. His friend paused and asked him why and he said, after you've seen what the world is really like, it is hard to have patience with a shopping mall. He'd had a realisation.

He'd seen the world in a new way and the constant chasing after enjoyment from stuff seemed vacuous to him. And that realisation is like the realisation that the preacher who speaks to us in this passage wants us to have. Here's the preacher we were introduced to last week in chapter 1 verse 1.

The son of David, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Probably referring to King Solomon. And he takes us on a world tour to give us undiluted reality about the world that we live in.

So that we might see the world for what it really is. So that like the soldier we will lose patience with our way of searching for satisfaction. He wants to burst the bubble so that we will look somewhere else to someone else far bigger. And he's already asked with us, is there anything new under the sun that will satisfy our hunger for satisfaction?

[2 : 19] But now he wants in this next chapter to ask a slightly different question. To ask, is there anything pleasurable enough to satisfy us? Can pleasure be my saviour? He asks. What's your pleasure?

And does it work? He is about to put that question to the test. So firstly this afternoon he tests his heart with pleasure. Just have a look at verse 1 of chapter 2 there.

I said in my heart, come now I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. Do you see what he's doing there? He's kind of speaking to himself, isn't he? And there are several points where the preacher does this through Ecclesiastes. He does this kind of talking to himself thing.

And it's as if we are getting to listen, to read what he writes in his own diary. But notice the important detail here, who he writes to in his diary. Did you see that in verse 1? Dear diary, I said in my heart. He speaks to his heart. Come now, I will test you with pleasure.

The test he's about to embark on is not a test of his tastes, whether he likes dark chocolate or white chocolate, whether he likes classical music or rock music. It's not about testing his tastes, but he wants to test his heart with pleasure. He wants to work out what lies beneath his desires, to scrutinise himself and his heart. To pull it apart, to really think about what makes him tick and where his desires come from. To take a step away from himself and to test himself and to ask what really is the human heart about? What are human desires about? He wants to know what does his heart really need? What is the human heart really about?

[4 : 50] And does pleasure under the sun fill that need? As he does this, as he tests his own heart, he invites us to do the same. To scrutinise the make-up of our own hearts. To review all of the ways that we have sought pleasure in this life and to examine how our hearts have responded to those pleasures. He asks the question with us, have all of those pleasures really worked?

Have they filled up my heart? Have they saved me? So he tests the heart with pleasure. So as he does that, secondly, see him enjoy a palace full of pleasure. See him enjoy a palace full of pleasure. He wants to test his heart with pleasure and so he dives in completely.

He's in a unique position to be able to run this experiment. Solomon was a very, very wealthy man and money is no object to him to make his pleasure shopping list a living reality in verse 2 to 10. So

he's going to test his heart with as many different pleasures as he can imagine.

You see, he tests his heart with comedy and with laughter in verse 2. He says, if I want comedy, I don't need to just watch the DVD. I can have live comedians at my live parties. I can have Tommy Cooper at my house. I can have Del Boy and Rodney 24-7. I can get everybody round and we can have a good old laugh. We can have a blast. We can enjoy ourselves. But from pretty early on we can see where this experiment is going. Pleasure and laughter is great for enjoyment. He knows it. But it's a poor saviour.

Comedy and laughter is a great thing, isn't it? And we enjoy a good laugh. There's medical evidence to show that it's just good for us to have a good old belly laugh with each other. But he knows that laughter can only go so far. It's great for enjoying, but it's poor for saving us. And we know that, don't we? That people who are obsessed with laughter, people who are only laughing all of the time, can actually be quite boring, annoying people. Laughter is good to a point. He says in verse 2, laughter is mad.

[7 : 59] The line between laughter being a good thing and laughter being folly is very, very thin indeed. Laughter is often used to cover up our own folly and our own foolishness. Laughing about things that should shame us. Laughing about a drunken episode. Laughter keeps us from keeping our responsibilities to one another. If I wrong somebody. If I wrong somebody, what do I do? I'll just say, well, lighten up.

The Proverbs says, like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death is the man who deceives his neighbour and says, I'm only joking. But he sees laughter itself cannot fulfil him. It cannot save him. Laughter needs a saviour too. Neither is music enough to save him, is it? In verse 8 he says, I've got singers, both men and women. Again, if I like music, I don't have to download it. I'll just buy the band. I'll just buy the orchestra. He can cancel out all of the noise and arrange his own personal soundtrack that gets him through life 24-7. He can put on the headphones and close his eyes and lose himself in the music. But we know, don't we, that as soon as we open our eyes, the world is still the same. The washing up still needs doing.

The nappies still need changing. The world hasn't really changed. Music is good for enjoying, but it's poor at saving. He looks at sex and alcohol, doesn't he? There's alcohol in verse 3. I search with my heart how to cheer my body with wine. He gets many concubines in verse 8. Sexual partners. The delight of the sons of men. He indulges in uninhibited sexual pleasure.

If he can think of it, it's as good as done. And all of these things are delightful to him, but they don't bring the gain he'd hoped for. With each partner and with each bottle of wine, he finishes with it and he says, I'm done with that. And it doesn't work. The beer adverts and the movies never show, do they, what happens at 3am after a heavy night. He tests his heart with parties.

He lays on parties. And if you know anything about Solomon, he lays on the biggest parties you've ever seen. Extravagant masses of indulgence. Thousands of people there. But once one party has been done, once one extravagant thing has been done, it feels a bit lame the next time. We did that last time and it just feels a bit lame now Solomon. So he has to do another party, even bigger and even better than the last one. He has to get more women and more drink and more music to keep the excitement going.

[11 : 40] They pleased me but they could not save me. So he tries a different pleasure in verse 7 and 8. He amasses material goods. Silver and gold and slaves. He sees it. He clicks on it. He buys it and he gets it delivered. And after all of that, he says in verse 9, I became popular. I surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. He enjoys popularity. People love him and his parties and all of his wealth.

I'm sure most of us have heard the story that Jesus tells about the prodigal son in Luke's gospel. In that story, the son leaves home and he spends his father's inheritance on extreme living, doesn't he?

He squanders his property on reckless living, Jesus says. And as we see what the preacher is doing in this experiment, we might think that the preacher is like the prodigal. But he is not. The difference between the preacher and the prodigal is that the prodigal goes to those pleasures, believing that they will satisfy him in the end. But as the preacher starts this experiment, he is more sceptical than that.

Do you see in verse 3, he says, All the while, my heart was still guiding me with wisdom. And in the end, in verse 11, he sees that it was a striving after the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun in this great pleasure-seeking project. It was like trying to catch the wind in a net.

In the chest of his heart, he was pleasuring himself, but he couldn't save himself with these pleasures.

[13 : 56] He was always having fun, but never happy. Describe so many people today. I wonder when we see this kind of thing in the Bible, our moral sensibilities kind of shrink back a little bit, don't they?

What's this doing here? But don't get the preacher wrong. This test of pleasure is not just a test of immoral pleasure.

You see, he does the respectable pleasure too, doesn't he? He enjoys art and architecture and work.

He's a lover of nature in verse 5. He's got the kind of country lifestyle. Sculpted trees and gardens and exotic flowers.

He is the respectable expert on gardener's question time, isn't he? Don't picture him as a renegade hedonist. He is refined and tasteful. He is upper class.

[15 : 05] He turns his palace into an art gallery to satisfy his heart. He enjoys the wonder of seeing wonderful good things.

The wonder that we've all felt when we see a floor-to-ceiling da Vinci painting, or we go to St. Paul's Cathedral. They're all good things, but he wants us to see again that with all pleasures, whatever it is that we look to, they cannot save us.

The pleasures themselves need saving. And the bottom line is that whatever you do to get pleasure, whether you drink too much, or you're a connoisseur, whether you sleep around, or if you keep the marriage bed holy, whether you do pleasure immorally or morally, pleasure itself is not enough for your heart or my heart.

And as good people, as respectable people, we make the mistake, don't we, of thinking that we are not hedonists.

But if we are seeking pleasure in this life to fulfil our hearts, then we're just doing it a bit more respectfully than what he's doing here. He is saying that even good and right pleasure is not enough.

[16 : 38] Even good sex in marriage is not enough. Even a healthy attitude to alcohol, or being on a gluten-free diet, or eating the right foods, or going to the gym, or reading good books that make us feel virtuous.

Those things that are good and bring pleasure to us, they will not save us. Vincent van Gogh, I didn't know this about him until this week, but apparently he did most of his artwork in an asylum. He suffered from mental illness, and was kept away from the rest of society. One Bible commentator uses him as an illustration of our search for pleasure.

He says, We and what we create resemble the marvellous but troubled Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. He painted majestic beauty from within an asylum.

The paintings bless and reveal that they could not preserve his sanity, and they cannot free us. So we must wait for gain from another source outside of the prison.

[17 : 59] And this is what the preacher discovers about his heart, and about trying to gain pleasure and fulfilling it under the sun. He could enjoy pleasure, but it couldn't save him.

Nothing he could provide for his own heart would satisfy his heart, because it came from himself. He says, Listen to me, I've done it all, believe me.

And you cannot change your hobbies, or your job, or your TV package, or your car, or your holiday operator, or your music taste, and get satisfaction.

These things in themselves will never free you from the prison of desire. You can fill your heart with more and more and more pleasure, but you will still be trapped, and it will be a striving after the wind.

But lastly, and more briefly, he tests his heart with pleasure, he enjoys a palace of pleasure, but thirdly and lastly, he glimpses lasting pleasure.

[19 : 11] He glimpses lasting pleasure. It was the French reformer, John Calvin, who said that we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God.

And maybe we recognise ourselves in the preacher here. We recognise that we are searching for satisfaction under the sun.

Always having fun, but never really happy. And he is saying to us, along with Calvin, that that feeling tells us that there must be a good God.

that there must be something more to fill my heart. We instinctively try to be happy, don't we? That's just a common pursuit for every man and woman on the earth. But this is the realisation that the preacher wants us to have here, to get frustrated with our own search, and to look to someone much greater.

[20 : 18] Our problem is that we take the pleasure that certain things provide as a sign that those pleasures constitute real gain in this life, that they can truly satisfy.

But what the preacher realises about his own heart is that he has a massive appetite that he himself cannot satisfy.

He realises that enjoyment under the sun is to drink in only what he can provide himself. But he cannot do it.

He cannot fill his own heart. It's not that the pleasures he chooses in this passage are too great. He's not overindulging here.

It's that the pleasures he's looking at aren't great enough. Later in chapter 3, and we'll look at this probably next week if you want to flick there in your Bibles, he speaks again about the human heart.

[21 : 33] And he says in chapter 3, verse 11, that God has made our hearts in a certain way. He says God has put eternity into man's heart.

He's saying it's as if there is a groove in every single heart that is eternal. That we have a collective consciousness deep down of an eternal, infinite source of joy and we will never be satisfied until it finds us.

It is vanity, he is saying, to fill that eternal groove with temporary things. As he has tested his heart, he realises that his heart is made for satisfaction that is beyond his power to grasp.

He is the king in Jerusalem, isn't he? Son of David. And as our tour guide, he paves the way for us for another king in Jerusalem, for David's greatest son, the king of kings.

The one the New Testament calls our wisdom, the Lord Jesus. And when the Lord Jesus Christ appears, as we hear him saying similar things to the preacher, actually.

[23 : 03] He says, everyone who drinks of this water under the sun will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I provide will never be thirsty again.

He says, come to me, you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. He says, I am the door, and if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and he will go in and out and find pasture. He will be filled. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly, says Jesus. Jesus Christ says, I am the one to fill that eternal groove in your heart.

Just as we close, let me just say that we have all tried this experiment, haven't we, even without the resources that Solomon had. We've all gone to at least one of these pleasures, and if we're honest, we've been disappointed at the end of it.

And those pleasures have enslaved us. But the good news of Jesus means freedom to enjoy these pleasures.

[24 : 28] It is actually that Jesus' disciples are people who can enjoy the good things that God puts in this world. Jesus' disciples can enjoy sex in marriage, and food and music and singing and architecture and art actually in a much fuller way.

Because Jesus' disciples are no longer enslaved to those pleasures. And so we can enjoy them more. When we stop treating those pleasures as our saviours, they can serve us well and we can enjoy them.

Lewis, C.S. Lewis, he says, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels by Jesus, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

The preacher says, I searched and I searched and I searched and I indulged all that I could imagine, I took it to my heart.

But Jesus preaches to us, your searching, your pleasures are just too lame under the sun. They are too weak for your hearts.

[26 : 03] so come to me and be filled with eternal joy. Be filled with waters that will quench you forever.

Let's pray.