

Ecclesiastes 2:2-11

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Date: 26 June 2019

Preacher: Doug O' Connell

[0 : 00] As some of you will know, Malcolm Mugridge was one of the most famous journalist personalities of the last century. That's success.

Furnished with a little money and even a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake in trendy diversions. That's pleasure.

It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote sufficiently heated for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time. That's fulfillment.

Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million and add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, measured against one sip of that living water Jesus Christ offers.

To the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. Now that's precisely the lesson that we're going to learn today.

[1 : 29] In the language of scripture, in the language of the prophet Jeremiah, the lesson is here to turn from drinking of idolatry's broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

To the Lord, Jeremiah 2.13, the fountain of living water. For in the language of our Savior itself, it is to drink from him the water that quenches our thirst forever.

A spring welling up unto eternal life. However, before we get to that living water that God offers to us in Christ, we first must walk through this waterless wilderness of coalesced testing of pleasure. Recently, my wife and I were watching the BBC's superb rendition of Dickens' Little Dorrit. As many of you know, Dickens had quite a knack for naming people and places within his novels.

I think of some of the people, the characters. There's Jeremiah Flintwich, Mr. Chocum Child, Uriah Heap, Volumina Deadlock, great name for an elders meeting.

[2 : 34] Volumina Deadlock. And then, of course, Ebenezer Scrooge. And then you think of some of the places he created. The Curiosity Shop, Bleak House, Crooks, Bottle Shop.

Well, here in proper Dickensian form, the person, I won't call him Koalef is the Hebrew name, but I'll call him King Solomon. King Solomon. That's the person.

He takes us to a place. And the place he's going to take us to, I'll call the Hollow House of Hedonism. The Hollow House of Hedonism.

See, this house is filled. It's filled with wine. It's filled with women, with garden, with gold, with songs and servants. But it's hollow. It's hollow when it comes to satisfying our deepest needs.

Now, within the House of Hedonism, there are many rooms. Now, King Solomon is going to show us four of them here in our text in Ecclesiastes 2, 1 through 11.

[3 : 31] He'll show us the private pub. He'll take us then to the garden, to the treasury, and finally to the bedroom. So first we come to what's called the private pub. Now, I know pub stands for public, and so private pub is seemingly a contradictory phrase.

But as I attempted to think of a place in our society that offers what Solomon first tested, pub, I thought, fits best. It's private, however, because it's in his own house.

And it seems to be for his soul entertainments. So look with me at verses 1 through 3 of Ecclesiastes 2. And then I'm also going to jump to the middle of verse 8 as well. I'm reordering things just a bit in this first room because we find these pleasures, these three pleasures I'll talk about in a minute, in the pub.

So the pleasures of laughter he finds, the pleasures of alcohol, and the pleasures of music. I said in my heart, verses 1 through 3, Come now, I will test you with pleasure, enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was havel, vanity.

I said of laughter, it is mad, of pleasure. What use is it? I search with my heart to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom. And how to lay hold of folly, so I might see what

was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of his life.

[4 : 49] And then if you go to the middle of verse 8, 8b, it reads, I got or I acquired singers, both men and women. Now we're later going to revisit the results of his pleasure experiment, these verses that are in here.

Behold, this was vanity, or what use was it? We'll do that once we've gone through, once we've traveled through the four rooms. So for now, we're in the private pub, and here Solomon is enjoying laughter and alcohol and music.

First, he had the best music of the day, seemingly on a daily basis. In verse 7, he begins his list of household possessions. He says this, I bought male and female slaves and so on.

And then in verse 8, he says, I got singers. You sort of wonder, did he just buy singers like he would a slave? Or did he just hire singers for special occasions?

Well, based on the context, my sense is they simply served in his house like his servants did and his concubines did. But whatever the case, when he wanted music, he got it. This is kind of the ancient version of the radio with one station available, choral music.

[5 : 58] However, unlike today's radio, it was, of course, it was live music. It was very expensive music and slightly exotic. It was exotic because if you remember from the Old Testament, in the temple choir, only men sang.

And here is Solomon having both men and women. This rare musical experience, this rare musical pleasure in those days was not so rare for the pleasure preacher.

And then alongside the music was the alcohol with his heart still guiding him with wisdom. That is with a certain mindful self control or objective indulgence, if that makes sense.

He tests wine. He tests wine to see if it will cheer him enough to forget the few days. In other words, to forget his life, to forget to find some happiness through wine in the happy hour of his life.

And with, of course, the wine comes laughter, which is touched on in verse two. Like the fool in Proverbs who laughs while he is unwittingly playing with fire. Solomon's private pub is alive with frivolity.

[7 : 04] Another song is sung. Another round is served. Another joke is told. We close the door. And there's nothing more to see or hear or smell, but the blur of a body lifting another glass.

The subtle sound of bronze echoing in the air. And the faint residue of doom walking about the room. Onward and outward, we move to the next room.

For the next place, we come to a garden. From the pub to a garden. We open these cedar French doors out of the private pub into the most beautiful garden east of Eden.

Look at verses four through seven. Look at Solomon's amazing architectural and agricultural achievements. He says, starting in verse four, I made great works.

I built houses and I planted vineyards for myself. 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.

[8 : 06] And then to keep all this going, he needed to employ a massive workforce. So I bought male and female slaves. I had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks more than anyone who had been before me in Jerusalem.

The commentator Derek Kidner writes here that Solomon has created a secular garden of Eden. Where there are no forbidden fruits.

And secular is the right term because God and God's command for the man to cultivate creation is nowhere found here in Ecclesiastes. But Solomon is actually doing all that Adam was supposed to do.

The verbs that are used here to plant, to water, to make the same exact verbs you'd find in Hebrew in Genesis 2. As are the nouns. The nouns like garden, all the fruits of the trees.

Same as Genesis. So Genesis is being echoed here in Ecclesiastes 2. But it's as if its nouns and its verbs, they bounce off the proud preacher.

[9 : 09] I, he says, not God or God through me, but I made great works. I build houses. I plant vineyards. I made myself gardens and parks. I planted fruit trees.

I made myself pools. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees.

I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees. I planted some trees.

I planted some trees!

I planted some trees. Out of this rock. Well, here in Ecclesiastes 2, 4 through 7, we see a self-made man who's not only in a sense made himself, he's made so much more around him.

Like God, and with God-like control and creativity, he's created this little ideal world within the fallen world. It's really like lifestyles of the rich and famous on steroids.

[10:10] But again, there's no time to stop here. In this room, he's moving us along. No time to gawk or even to covet what he has or what he's done. We're being moved along not only by the author, but by the photographer from Better Homes and Gardens.

He wants to be certain to outdo the guy from Architectural Digest last month. So Solomon's servants take us away. And they take us back into the house, down this narrow stairway, deep beneath the wine cellar, past the reporter from Forbes magazine, and through this huge iron door into the treasury.

The treasury. But how does Solomon afford all this stuff? The houses, the vineyards, the pool, the parks, the servants, the singers, and so on? Well, the answer is found here.

Verse 8, I also gathered for myself silver and gold, the treasure of kings and provinces. Now that's just an understatement if you know anything about the life of Solomon.

Or if you've read about Solomon in 1 Kings 10, for example, where we read about his incredible wealth that was obtained through taxes and through tributes, things that were given to him, and through trade.

[11:18] I'll read just a few verses from 1 Kings 10. Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents.

So how much is that? Well, it's 25 tons of gold. In other words, it's a staggering fortune. In American currency, it's hundreds of millions of dollars, maybe even a billion dollars a year he was bringing in. Then read on. So here's a sampling of what he did with all this gold. King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold. 600 shekels of gold went into each shield.

The king also made an ivory throne. Great thing to do. Ivory is expensive too, isn't it? An ivory throne. And then what did he do? He overlaid the whole thing with gold.

So to sum up, if you read 1 Kings 10, money was not an issue. Money was not an issue for Solomon. Whatever he wanted, he got. He had the Chateau in Switzerland, the beach house in the Bahamas, the penthouse in Paris.

[12:25] He was the primary stockholder of BP and Ford. He had that Rupert Murdoch snap of the finger to him. He had Steve Jobs' business genius to him. And most importantly, he had the Midas touch.

Everything he touched turned to gold. Gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold.

Thirteen times in 1 Kings 10, gold is mentioned. But gold is cold. It can't embrace you.

It can't touch you. It can't make love to you. And so Solomon dialogued with himself. Might the pleasures of the human body, might that be the answer?

Let me see if women can quench this strange melancholy that still exists, that's not satiated by money and the stuff that money can buy.

[13:29] Now get this, as the book of 1 Kings transitions from Solomon's wealth in chapter 10 to Solomon's women in chapter 11, so too does Ecclesiastes 2.8.

It transitions in that last verse, I also gathered for myself many concubines for the light of the children of Adam, of man. A man's heart is how it might be translated.

John Donne wrote to Solomon here that he hides none of his sins. Solomon preaches himself and he pours out his soul in that book of Ecclesiastes.

That's true, but it is a tragic, it's a tragic tale that he tells. The compromise of the covenant is what led to his spiritual downfall in the divided kingdom, which is perhaps why it is listed last among his pleasure experiences.

In other words, for emphasis. Now the Hebrew word here for concubines, it comes from the same word for breasts. It's why some translators think we should actually translate it breasts.

[14:38] He had many breasts, or he had abundant breasts. And however you translate it, it's a crude reference. It's a crude reference to women who are used as pleasure objects, for sexual pleasure.

Now while the king might have married for political reasons, for military stability, that's not the stress that's given here. Sex is the stress. Sexual immorality is the stress.

Solomon was anti-Genesis as much as he was anti-Jesus. That is, he was against God's command from the beginning that it should be one man and one woman for life.

But our culture is the same, isn't it? It's anti-Genesis. It's anti-Jesus. Sadly, this bedroom scene here isn't anything we haven't seen before.

While our sex-crazed culture, we gasp at some of the sex scandals that make the news. We don't gasp at a lot of other things. We don't gasp about teenage promiscuity or best-selling books about erotic bondage.

[15 : 43] We don't gasp about the hundred billion, I have to look at the number, hundred billion dollar porn industry. We don't gasp at easy divorce due to acceptable, inevitable adultery.

And now we don't even gasp at homosexual behavior. Conventional morality has been shelved. Biblical ethics are labeled outdated or expired or even worse, danger, poison.

And what Woody Allen said to the media about the sexual relationship with the adopted teenage daughter of his wife, the heart wants what the heart wants.

It's become our slogan more and more. We've listened to the seductive sounds of the sirens to borrow from Homer's Odyssey.

We've sacrificed our souls on the altar of sexual idolatry. For what Solomon gives just one line to, our culture gives 10,000 libraries to. Solomon's private bedchamber is now open to public view.

[16 : 51] And nobody blushes anymore. Nobody blushes. Christian, let's blush. And let's turn our eyes away. Let's leave it all behind.

Leave behind this pub and this garden and the treasury and the bedroom of this hollow house. This hollow house of hedonism. Let's escape for our lives and not look back.

It's time to flee vanity. It's time to flee vanity fair. And it's time to run over the delectable mountains through the wicked gates into the celestial city. So listen, Solomon's pleasure test was an absolute failure.

And he admits as much in verses 1 and 2 and 9 through 11. And if you look at those verses, just notice the word in the ESV, behold. I love that they translate it. Behold. I said in my heart, now come, I will test you with pleasure.

Enjoy yourself. But behold. Behold what? Well, this was also vanity. Like smoke rising up in the air. Nothing of consequence. I said it. Laughter is mad. If pleasure, what use is it?

[17 : 57] And then we have the same bitter disillusionment put differently in summary form in verses 9 through 11. So I became great and I surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes, outward delights, desired, I did not keep from them. My heart inward delivers from no pleasure. Then I considered all that my hands have done.

All the toil that I expended in doing it. And behold. Behold what? All this vanity and a striving after the wind. Nothing was to be gained under the sun.

In the popular sitcom cartoon, The Simpsons, Homer Simpson, in one of the episodes, he says to his boss, Mr. Burns, Mr. Burns, you're the richest man I know.

To which Burns replies, Yes, but I'd trade it all in for more. Well that is not how Solomon feels the morning after.

[19 : 03] The morning after his years long pleasure party. Instead you've got to hear him humming those honest lines from the rock band Nine Inch Nails.

What have I become? My sweetest friend. Everyone I know goes away in the end. You could have it all. You could have it all.

My empire. My empire of dirt. At the beginning and the end of our text, King Solomon stamps empire of dirt across everything in between.

The wine and the women, empire of dirt. The gardens and the gold, empire of dirt. The songs and the servants, empire of dirt. You can have it all.

But why? Why? What went wrong with his pleasure and possessions experiment that in the end he'd call it profitless? Well, two reasons he gives for failure in this pleasure experiment.

[20 : 07] And first is this. putting self first ironically fails to satisfy self. Putting self first ironically fails to satisfy self.

And second, putting pleasure first ironically fails to give pleasure. The first failure breaks the second commandment you should love others as much as you love yourself. The second failure breaks the first and greatest commandment you should love God with all your heart and your mind and your soul and your strength.

So first I want to talk about this issue of self. Self. I've already noted in verses 4-7 how much Solomon spoke about himself. But further notice how self just saturates this section of scripture. The word I along with me and my and myself they just dominate these verses. The word I is used 18 times in this little section of scripture. The word my 13 times.

Me 4 times. Myself. 4 times. Even the word yourself. Enjoy yourself. It's Solomon talking to himself. It's a lot of self-focus. And it's not just the language it's also the focus of the accomplishments.

[21 : 20] The list is all self-serving. It's not philanthropic. That is on behalf of other people. He doesn't mention anything about building public parks so the populace can enjoy it.

He says this I build houses houses. And I built gardens or vineyards for myself. For myself. The sole purpose of doing it. But here it's all artistically intentional what he's doing.

He's written this for us to see what he saw and what he experienced. He boasts in his achievements. He boasts in his enjoyments because he's underscoring ironically their inadequacy. And it's brilliant. I think the literary artistry here is awesome but so is the practical point. We all know that self-centeredness and self-indulgence never satisfies long.

Right? Why is that the case? Well it's common grace. It's the way God has designed us. You can call it the pleasure paradox. If we answer the Westminster Shorter's Catechism's first question what is the chief end of man by saying man's chief end is to glorify himself and enjoy himself as much as possible.

[22 : 29] We'll always discover that those earthly pleasures that we grasp so tightly in our hands it's as if like sand they eventually fall through our fingers.

You see pleasure has a way of promising more than it can actually produce. David Hubbard says this that its advertising agency is better than its manufacturing department.

The one drink, the one sexual fling, the one contest won, one project accomplished, one wild party, none of these or all of them put together can bring any human being satisfaction.

The sin of selfishness, it actually won't satisfy and neither will the other sin, the sin of idolatry.

Putting pleasure first ironically fails to give us the pleasure that we're looking for.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book on Ecclesiastes and it was titled When All You Ever Wanted Wasn't Enough. Well, I don't think it's the best summary of the whole book. It's a great summary of this section of Ecclesiastes.

[23 : 37] When all you ever wanted isn't enough. Why isn't it enough? It isn't enough if God isn't first. John Wesley put it this way, there is no happiness, true lasting happiness outside of God.

Listen, many of the pleasures that are mentioned here, such as laughing, planting vineyards, drinking wine, creating, maintaining a garden, are all pleasures you'll find commended in the Bible. In fact, in the wisdom literature of the Bible, which I teach for a living, I think especially in the book of Proverbs and Job, you'll find that pleasures and possessions in fact can be rewards of righteousness.

Even throughout Ecclesiastes, pleasure is constantly commended, as we'll find out tonight. So what's the problem then? What's the problem with the pleasures that are listed here in 2, 1 through 11?

Well, the problem is that some of these pleasures are immoral, and that all of them are idolatrous. All of them are idolatrous. I'm the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, therefore you shall have no other gods before me.

[24 : 51] Solomon put pleasure, put pleasures before the Lord God, before the worship of the Lord God. So then here, the lesson of course, is that when God comes first, when we worship the divine, then genuine human satisfaction follows.

That's the way it works. Christ satiates the soul. It's a good way. He brings that water we talked about at the beginning of the sermon. He satiates the soul.

In the book of Philippians, Paul commands Christians, I think it's four times, to rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord. Why? Well, we can rejoice because Jesus, as Paul puts it earlier in Philippians 2, in humility, counted others more significant than himself.

He counted others more than significant than himself. So much so that he made himself nothing. Taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. You see, Jesus, King Jesus, not King Solomon, but King Jesus, is the epitome of selflessness, not selfishness. For our sake, for our salvation, he denied the desires of the flesh.

[26 : 12] He denied the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions. Also, Jesus is the epitome of putting God the Father first. When Jesus was tempted by Satan and later by his own disciple, by Peter, to take the crown before the cross, to take the crown instead of the cross, he wouldn't bow the knee to this idol of temporary power, of worldly pleasures.

Rather, as Hebrew puts it, it's for the joy that was set before him. It's such an interesting phrase. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross. You see, our Lord, who taught us to deny ourselves, to pick up our crosses, he didn't do so because he was some sort of cosmic killjoy.

Rather, because he's the one who knows the way to the pleasures of God. In the presence of God, there is fullness of joy, the psalmist tells us. At his right hand are pleasures forevermore.

He alone knows how and where to enter into the Father's joy. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Nothing. Vanity. The hollow house of hedonism is hollow. But what does it profit a man or a woman or a child to lose his life for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the kingdom?

[27 : 34] He answers everything. Everything. Blessed are happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Doesn't get any bigger than that. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit not a big house like Solomon's. They shall inherit all. They shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.

Satisfied. My brothers and sisters, let us flee. We're tempted every day, aren't we, to flee. We're tempted to live in this house of hedonism. But let us flee the house of hedonism into the hallowed presence of our soul-satisfying God.

Let's pray.