

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

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[0 : 00] Would you listen if I told you the secret to a life of joy? It's actually an open secret, but I can take you to a man who has done extensive research! That has been widely reviewed and weighed.

It's been around for a long time. In fact, the study has been about for quite a long time. It's been published. It's been republished. And you can actually get it for free on the internet. So it is very much an open secret.

But this man has an answer to the question of where we can find joy. It seems so that people aren't listening. When we look around, do you think, looking inside at your own heart, that there's really enough joy in there? When you look around, people you work with, people you brush up against each day, do you think, do you know, we are absolutely swimming in joy?

People aren't listening. Let me take you to that man. Turn to page 553. The man is called Solomon. And we saw last week, chapter 1, that part of his research was into an earlier study of generations and the natural world around him.

Our world. And our researcher concluded that it was all vanity. It was vanity of vanities. Chapter 1, verse 2.

[1 : 43] All is vanity. We said that word is vapor. Foggy vapor. Mist. And his research last time showed us that generations, they come and they go, and the world keeps turning as it always had, and yet all he sees is vapor.

But he wasn't content to stop his research at that point. He has seen, yes, that we can't control the world around us, but really, is there no gain?

Is there no profit in the world in learning, or building wealth, or creating jobs, or enjoying laughter and culture and things like that?

Is there no profit or joy in these things? Because these are the things that we're told will actually give us the good life. These are the things that our culture tells us that if we can get a grip on them, if we can get enough of them into our lives, then that's where joy is.

And yet our experience tells us something else. So Solomon, verse 13 of chapter 1, if you can look down, applied his heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

[3 : 05] He wants to be sure that his initial conclusion, that as the world keeps turning, as generations come and go, we have no control over them, as we grasp after gain there, his conclusion that that is all vapor, he wants to be sure.

So he checks out all that is done under heaven. Is there no gain to be had? And we see as well that this is an arm's length project.

He went all in, chapter 1, verse 16. He said in his heart, chapter 2, verse 1, he said in his heart, chapter 2, verse 20, he gave up his heart.

If there was gain to be had in these things, he was going to find them. He went all in. If these things could deliver the joy that he's looking for, he would find out.

And this evening, I want to take us through his research, and I want to highlight what it revealed. So that's our first point, his research. Let's look at that. Solomon's research.

[4 : 06] He starts with the pursuit of wisdom. Chapter 1, 16 and 17, 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, and I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

I'm going to acknowledge that I'm already wise, but I need to give myself further to wisdom and to knowledge. So Solomon gives himself to great works of literature and science.

He scars the corridors of learning for answers. He wrestles with the great ideas of philosophy, and he studies the opposite of sanity and wisdom. There they are, madness and folly.

We need to understand sanity and wisdom. If we're going to do that, well, we need to understand the opposite, madness and folly, in order to understand the human psyche, the whole human being more deeply.

He is a forerunner of 90s new labor, education, education, education. He thinks, if I can get more wisdom, more knowledge, let's see what's there. But look at 1 verse 18, the more he learned, the less he knew.

[5 : 15] He says it was a striving after the wind. It was like trying to go and direct the wind in a particular course or direction.

It was like grasping handfuls of fresh air. There was nothing there. And he says it's not simply vexing. It's not simply frustrating.

It actually made him sad. Do you see? In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. All of this wisdom actually has just made me sad.

All the effort, it has felt like a complete waste of time because I'm no further on. And that's true, isn't it? Learning, like everything else, if it is motivated by a desire for you to be clever, if it is motivated by a desire for you to be wise for your sake, so you can demonstrate to other people how smart you are, well, it's like this.

You find the more you know, the more you know how little you actually know. The search for wisdom is like vapor. It eludes your grasp. Solomon then changes tack.

[6 : 27] Do you see? He leaves the library and heads into town. Chapter 2, verse 1. I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. The word for pleasure here is joy or happiness, so we're really getting to the heart of things now.

We're getting to the heart of this research project. I'm going to go in pursuit of this. I'm going to test myself that everything that I've been told will deliver the joy that I'm looking for.

Now, I don't necessarily think here that we should see that Solomon is just letting the bricks off completely. He mentions several times, like in verse 3, how his heart still guides him with wisdom in this pursuit.

I don't think he's describing here complete unchecked hedonism in the way some people have interpreted this section, but he is pressing in. He's pressing in hard to see what he can gain, to see how he can profit in his search for joy.

First place to start, laughter. Verse 2. Maybe this stand-up scene or giving myself into comedy box sets or something like that, maybe that will bring the sort of pleasure that I'm looking for.

[7 : 36] Verse 3. He then opens a bottle to gladden his heart, and then he tries to lay hold on folly to see if, unlike wisdom, it can bring the kind of gain that he's looking for because he is, verse 3, looking for the good for mankind.

Laughter, a glad heart with wine, maybe folly, not taking life so seriously, maybe just being a bit more carefree. Next he gives himself, verse 4, to achievement.

I made great works. I built houses. I planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted them, all kinds of fruit trees. Hard work.

That's going to deliver. Making stuff happen. Getting things done. Being productive. If I can be productive, I'll feel like I've achieved something, and there'll be a sense of joy.

He grows his staff. He grows his wealth. He grows his cultural CV and his women, verse 8. Singers will play music for him on demand, and his concubines will give him other things on demand as well.

[8 : 52] He has at his disposal, at the very tips of his fingers, whenever he wants it, the things that we are told everyone wants. Money, sex, and power. These are the things that promise to deliver what we desire, and these are the things that we give ourselves to.

And then, he tops even that. Look at verse 9. He tops that with the intoxicating thrill of the recognition of his peers. He was a great one. He was a great one.

There were plaques all over Jerusalem with his name on them. Anything there in what he's talking about that you haven't thought at some point that if you had it, then you'd be happy.

If you had more of it, then you would find the joy that you long for. More pleasure, more possessions, more productivity, more power, more prestige, then you'd be happy.

Then you would remain, then joy would remain in your grasp. It wouldn't slip through your fingers like it always seems to do. That's what we want, isn't it?

[10:17] That's what we've been trained to believe. That's what our culture is telling us we need. More pleasure, more possessions, more productivity, more power, more prestige. Then you'll have the good life.

Look at 2 verse 10. Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure.

Now, if I was to say that to you, there would be a limit to what I could actually get hold of. Not the king, with all his royal privilege.

When he said, I kept my heart from no pleasure, you can't think of a pleasure that he didn't try. And look at his conclusion. Chapter 2 verse 11.

Here's where his research project got him. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity, a striving after wind.

[11:18] And there was nothing to be gained under the sun. All the learning and all the laughter, all the work, all the wealth, all the silver, all the servants, and what's he left with?

Vapor. Handfuls of vapor. Bagfuls of vapor. Bin bagfuls of vapor. It's all a striving after the wind. That phrase, striving after the wind, means literally shepherding the wind. In this research project, Solomon has given his heart to a search for joy and he reports back.

He says, looking for gain in these things, looking for meaning, in laughter, work, possessions, power, is the same kind of madness as standing on a headland on a windy day and trying to direct the wind.

That's his research. But Solomon doesn't simply share this discovery with us from his own bitter experience. He explains that he's made another discovery in the process. His research actually leads secondly to his realization.

[12:34] His realization. Go back up to 113 again. He says, He realizes that the misty nature of things, the vaporous nature of reality, flows from a world that is broken.

His language here takes us right back. The children of man here is literally the sons of Adam. And the painful business and the crooked things that cannot be straightened, they are the fruit of the curse that God has laid on the world in Genesis chapter 3 after Adam's fall.

This is why Solomon's search for gain gleaned nothing. And this is why all our works that are done under the sun, verse 14, our vapor and an exercise in directing the wind.

God has subjected our world to futility. We can't straighten out the things that are crooked because God has made them that way. We can't count the things that are lacking because God has made it that way.

That is just how it is in this world in which we live. When you choose to live life on your terms in God's world, that's what Adam did in the garden.

[14:06] He grasped after gain in a garden of gift. Now that's important that we know that. People think that God was being mean when He told Adam not to touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But there was a whole garden of gift. There were lots of other trees that he could have had. There was one that he was not allowed to touch yet because the knowledge of good and evil, he wasn't yet ready to handle that.

He wasn't yet mature enough to discern good and evil. That belonged to God alone. But Adam grasped. He grasped for profit for himself.

And in disobeying God, he plunged the whole world into sin. He drug us with Him. That's the reason why we do the things that we don't want to do in life.

That's why those things that we wish were true of our character more and more seem to elude us. That's why we sin. And that is why God has judged the world in this way.

[15:15] Solomon has come to recognize that the world is like this because it's broken. But it is also the fruit of our rebellion. It is the fruit of this sin that Solomon's research has led him to realize.

The fruit of that rebellion is this. Death steals everything. And Solomon says, look, if you've got to choose, wisdom is better than folly, 2 verse 14.

Better to make good decisions in life than bad ones. Basic common sense. But, whether you're the wisest man in the world, 2 verse 14, or you're the biggest idiot that has ever walked the face of the earth, the end is the same for both.

The professor of wisdom and the guy who makes dumb decision after dumb decision will, in the end, both find themselves in the grave. One out of one dies.

That's the bottom line. But there are, do you notice, two implications of this that Solomon finds particularly galling. The first is in verse 16. It's this.

[16:23] It's not just that you're going to die, but you're going to be forgotten. Verse 16, four of the wise, as of the fool, there is no enduring remembrance. Seeing, as to come, all will have been long forgotten.

How the wise dies just like the fool. He's saying, death doesn't discriminate from the top of society to the bottom. No one can outsmart, no one can anti-aging protocol their way out of it.

And while there may be a funeral with a few warm words offered in your memory, there is a good chance that your children's children won't know your name. And if they do, their children probably won't know your name.

I remember a few years ago, my uncle, my dad's brother, he was in his 80s, and he was coming to the end of his life, and I asked him about his grandparents, so my great-grandparents.

What was your grandfather's name? This was his grandfather, he's towards the end of his life, he's not in great health, but it took him a long time to remember. Do you remember the first name of your great-grandparents?

[17:37] Do you remember what they did for a living? Do you know that? There was a time when they thought that the world revolved around them the way we think that it revolves around us. There was a time when they thought they were the generation, and yet you don't know their names.

It's vapor. We'll all be forgotten. But you won't just be forgotten, verse 18. Whatever you've managed to store up, you'll leave it all to someone else.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun. This research project made him really cross. Why, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he'll be wise or a fool, yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity. Everything that you worked for will be left to those who follow. Every single penny that accrues to your name will go to someone else.

As of this afternoon, Elon Musk is the richest man in the world. Do you know how much he will leave? All of it. That old adage, you can't take it with you, is true.

[19:02] And Solomon says that even with whatever clever stuff you're able to do with wills, you don't know whether you're leaving it to a fool or a wise man. Whatever control you want to have over your wealth, you lose all of that when you die.

It's a stark realization for Solomon. And I wonder if this research actually became an attempt to chase this basic reality from his mind.

That's what we do, isn't it? When we experience some of the vapor of life, when we feel this sense of vanity about everything, we know that laughter doesn't fix the problems of the world.

Just listen to a single interview with a comedian. Their lives are completely surrounded with laughter, and yet there's rarely any joy when you get behind the mask.

We know that wine doesn't work, and we know that any achievements that we've made didn't deliver the lasting joy that we'd hoped for, plus we know that anything that accrues to our account now will be wiped out by death.

[20:02] This is the world we live in. So what can we do but distract ourselves with anything that we can find? The alternative to distracting ourselves is there in verse 20.

And gave my heart up to despair. Very honest. But let's be honest ourselves. What else is there?

There are lots of addicts that live on the streets around where we live, and you see them in various states, and my heart goes out to them. But there's an honesty about the way that they live.

All they want is to shut out the despair. All they want is to be taken for a few moments out of their days that are full of sorrow. And that's what that hit will do for a few minutes and they'll do anything to get it.

It is an escape from the pain. It is a release from the despair. We have our own ways of doing the same thing. Some are more respectable than others, some not so respectable.

[21:08] Solomon gathered singers to play for him at his request to keep him from silence and his inner thoughts. We do the same thing with earbuds.

We don't need to hire singers to follow us around and be a little bit anti-social I suppose in some ways. But we do exactly the same thing. We just plug our earbuds in and put the music on.

Or the talk show or the radio or something. Just some noise or other to shut out the despair.

Screens, social media, any digitized diversion from the reality of this sorrowful, vaporous world.

Well, is despair the only option? Happily not. Solomon has actually discovered that there's another way to think about death and that it is not to close our eyes and shut it out.

But actually, to stare at it and to stare at the reality of that and to allow it to reshape the way we think about the present. To allow the future, whenever that will be, and our death to teach us how to live now in the present in God's world.

[22 : 25] All is not lost. When we accept that this life is vapor, when we stop trying to resist it and try to store things up for ourselves, to try and make some gain in this world, when we accept that this life is vapor, we're actually liberated from trying to control it for our gain.

We're set free to enjoy actually receiving what we have as a gift. Solomon identifies this then as our third point, his resolution. He's given us his research, he's told us about his realization, and thirdly, here's his resolution.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment. That's what we're looking for, enjoyment in his 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 has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. Enjoyment.

Enjoyment. Joy.

A life marked by joy is available in a world of vapor. How is this so? Well, did you notice? Given from the hand of God.

[23 : 43] The theologian Ian Proven summarizes the point, which is the point of the whole book, saying this, life in God's world is gift, not gain. And that is the open secret.

That is the open secret. Life in God's world is gift, not gain. When we use the world for our own ends, our gain, we're just left with handfuls of vapor.

We're just left directing the breeze. But while the vapor remains, and it does remain, understanding that life is a gift from God doesn't automatically make it easy. We're going to see that again and again and again.

You know it from your own experience. But there is real joy in the receipt of the gift. I said last week, God gives two gifts. One is the food and the drink, and the other is the ability to enjoy them.

And that is clear with a more literal translation, actually, of verse 24. Have a look at verse 24. More literal translation would be this. There is no good in a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

[24 : 46] This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. There is no inherent good in a person that they should be able to find enjoyment in their work.

He is saying the only way that we can enjoy the things that are given to us by God is from God, and recognizing that he is the one who gives the gift.

Just with food, think about it, just with food, there are loads of reasons why we aren't able to enjoy it. We think, oh, there is better quality elsewhere, and we think, oh, this maybe isn't the best thing I could be eating.

Oh, there is a different restaurant that is better. You can't enjoy the seven-pound bottle of wine because you know that there is a seventy-pound bottle of wine that is better. And the seventy-pound one was okay, but it is not as good as the seven-hundred-pound one or the seven-thousand-pound one.

That never stops. That is the treadmill of never being satisfied. That is why all of these things are vapor. If even eating and drinking needs to be about gain rather than receiving what God has provided and saying thank you and enjoying it, then it will never satisfy.

[26 : 04] The same is true of all things that Solomon tried. Wisdom, knowledge, money, sex, power. There is no inherent joy in any of these things if we don't acknowledge the divine giver.

You don't need me to provide you with examples of people for whom these things have become a source of misery despite having them in abundance. But I can't get old Matthew Perry out of my head.

Chandler Bing from Friends, he had superstardom and he pursued gain in laughter and wealth and wine and sex and fame. And a couple of months ago he wound up addicted to pain medication and a couple of months ago we discovered that he had a live-in servant whose job was to inject him with ketamine every day.

When we pursue gain in those things, rather than receiving them as gifts to be enjoyed, they don't just leave us empty vapor, but they can consume us.

Solomon has discovered that God is the source of joy. In verse 26, he has given wisdom and knowledge and joy to those who please him. When you grasp for joy on your own terms, it always eludes you but when you trust God, he gives joy and like all his gifts, he passes it out, not with a teaspoon but with a shovel.

[27 : 32] If we can let go of grasping for these things, if we can let go of thinking that if we get that, then we'll have some gain in God's world and if we just receive what he gives us and we say thank you and we enjoy it in the moment, we're set free.

That is joy. And that is the offer that Jesus makes to his disciples. You remember in John chapter 16, they have been with Jesus, he has told them that he'll be going to the cross for their sin and then returning to the father and they're anxious.

They want to hold on to him for themselves. But he says he'll send his spirit and he will give them joy. He says, ask and you will receive that your joy may be half full.

Your joy might just be enough to get you to the end of the day. That's not what he says, is it? Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full. The fullness of joy.

That is the offer of the gospel. That is the openness of all open secrets that in the Lord Jesus, the one who holds you fast even in the vapor of real life.

[28 : 45] while she may not be able to master life, you can enjoy it. Let's pray together.