

## LESSON 3

# Searching for Meaning

### Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 1:12—2:26

### Key Verse

“There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

### Overview

Solomon decided to search “under the sun” to see if he could find meaning apart from God. He conducted two experiments to see if he could achieve lasting fulfillment through wisdom or through pleasure. He found that both wisdom and pleasure fell short of the lasting enjoyment which he desired.

### Topic

Wisdom and pleasure

### Theme

Wisdom and pleasure are not suitable substitutions for a relationship with God.

### Desired Learner Response

The student will evaluate how he or she is trying to find happiness and will realize that God alone can fill his or her needy heart.

### Lesson Outline

- I. Explanation (Eccles. 1:12–15)
- II. Experiment (Eccles. 1:16–2:11)
  - A. Wisdom (1:16–18)
  - B. Pleasure (2:1–11)
- III. Evaluation (Eccles. 2:12–23)
  - A. Of wisdom (2:12–17)
  - B. Of pleasure (2:18–23)
- IV. Exhortation (2:24–26)

### Materials

- Transparencies 1 and 6
- Items for the “This is Your Life” Getting Started activity
- Case study for lesson 3 from resource CD
- Ecclesiastes 2:24 verse card from resource CD

## Getting Started

### This Is Your Life

Arrange for a brief presentation of King Solomon’s pursuits in the format of the vintage TV show “This Is Your Life.” During the week enlist an adult

man to act the part of King Solomon and give a summary of his experiences based on Ecclesiastes 1:12–14.

Introduce King Solomon as the guest on today's "This Is Your Life" program. One by one introduce his pursuits and accomplishments (listed below). A simple prop could represent each accomplishment. Hand each prop to Solomon as it is presented so he will be holding all the props when he summarizes his experiences at the end. (Suggested props are in parentheses beside each accomplishment.) Solomon

- built his dream house, complete with elaborate swimming pools (hammer);
- designed and planted beautiful flower gardens and orchards (flower or fruit);
- achieved the highest education (academic book or diploma);
- hired many servants (white glove or white hand towel);
- increased in wealth (money);
- acquired livestock (halter, lasso, or plastic toy farm animal);
- engaged musicians for private concerts (violin bow or sheet music);
- had many girlfriends (bow.).

Ask King Solomon to say a few words about his life. Solomon should give a summary of Ecclesiastes 1:12–14. (See example below.) For dramatic effect, Solomon could set aside each prop as his speech progresses.

Example Summary: Yes, I did all these things—I did them as part of an experiment. I wanted to discover if it is possible to find fulfillment and significance "under the sun," that is, without considering God. As king, I had virtually unlimited power to do as I pleased. So I used all the advantages of my royal position as I looked for meaning in life. For my first experiment, I tried to find fulfillment in human wisdom and pleasure.

### King for a Day

**Ask:** What would you like to do if you could be a king for a day with unlimited resources? How often do you catch yourself wishing you could take an exotic vacation or go somewhere extravagant? (Questions 1, 2)

Solomon could almost do anything and learn anything his heart could desire as the king. He recorded his conclusions about wisdom and pleasure and the futility of each in Ecclesiastes 1:12—2:26.

## Searching the Scriptures

### I. Explanation (Eccles. 1:12–15)

**READ:** Ask a learner to read Ecclesiastes 1:12–15.

Solomon began to describe his first observation of life by giving a preview of what he had found. In 1:12 he repeated the description of himself as king of



Israel. In ancient times, kings were regarded as the primary source of wisdom. A king had virtually unlimited power to do as he pleased. This power enabled Solomon to use all the advantages of his position as he looked for meaning in life. If the king with all of his special opportunities could not achieve satisfaction, then life truly was vanity.

Solomon's search was intensive and exhaustive; he scrutinized life in detail (v. 13). Nevertheless, no matter how far he searched, he always came to the same disappointing conclusion: God has given mankind a painful existence that involves much arduous toil. The more he examined life, the more convinced Solomon became that something was dreadfully wrong. He found no evidence to the contrary.

In verse 14 Solomon summarized his conclusions: I have seen all there is, and it is all meaningless. In all of his search in the human sphere of activities, he found nothing that provided true fulfillment or satisfaction. People are incapable of controlling the variables of life to produce a satisfying result. They may work diligently, but their work will likely be in vain.

**DISCUSS:** As you look at those around you, what percentage of unbelievers would you say have come to the same conclusion as Solomon? What percentage of believers would you say have come to Solomon's conclusion? Why do people not take Solomon at his word? (Questions 3–5)

Without God, what happens in life is without meaning and beyond control (v. 15). Many things are crooked, for they do not correspond to what is right and just. However, as far as Solomon could determine, we are powerless to make them straight. Human intellect lacks the ability to answer the puzzles of life. In numerous cases people reach the end of their limited understanding and have to give up on comprehending life.

## II. Experiment (Eccles. 1:16—2:11)

### A. Wisdom (1:16–18)

In Ecclesiastes 1:16–18, Solomon traced the path that led him to his disappointing conclusion. First, he tried the road of wisdom to see if it would take him to fulfillment in life.

Solomon was noted for his unrivaled wisdom. He resolved to use his great experience of wisdom and knowledge to find meaning in life (v. 16). He thought that he, with all his ability to discern and reason, could surely discover a satisfying answer to the puzzle of life.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 6 with the top left-hand quadrant revealed. **DISCUSS:** In what ways do people today pursue wisdom to fulfill or add significance to their lives? (Record learners' answers on the transparency.) (Question 6)

In verse 14 “vexation of spirit” can mean “shepherding wind.” When God is out of the picture, finding fulfillment in life is as futile as trying to herd the wind. It is beyond human control.

Searching for Significance	
Wisdom	Experiments Ecclesiastes 1:16–18

Hebrew often uses two extremes to imply everything between them. The meaning is that Solomon examined all the available evidence.

Solomon gave himself wholeheartedly to the challenge (v. 17). He searched the full range of human experience, from wisdom to madness and folly. He looked at the good and the bad, trying to scrutinize life exhaustingly. He overlooked almost nothing in the sphere of human experience. However, there was one glaring omission in Solomon's search.

**ASK:** What was the one glaring omission in Solomon's search of wisdom? (Question 7) **READ:** Have a learner read the answer in Solomon's own words in Proverbs 9:10.

Proverbs 9:10 teaches that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Solomon looked everywhere but the right place for the insight he needed. He was trying to find under the sun what can only be understood in terms of God's control over life.

As Solomon reflected on what he had learned on the road of human wisdom, he decided that "in much wisdom is much grief" (Eccles. 1:18). The more he learned in his search, the more he realized that life is dreadfully out of line. The best human understanding led only to more pain and sorrow. If Solomon were to find fulfillment, it would not come in human reason apart from God. It would have to come from some other source.

### B. Pleasure (2:1–11)

After finding that human wisdom leads to disappointment, Solomon investigated the path of pleasure. As the king, he had resources and freedom to do as he pleased; therefore, he used every opportunity to satisfy the nagging ache in his heart.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 6 with the right half covered. **DISCUSS:** In what ways do people today pursue pleasure to fulfill or add significance to their lives? (Record learners' answers on the transparency.) (Question 8)

Searching for Significance	
<div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Wisdom</div>	<b>Experiments</b> Ecclesiastes 1:16–18 
	<div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Pleasure</div> Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 

In pursuing pleasure, Solomon did not just give himself to wild abandon. Instead, he resolved to "prove" himself with mirth and pleasure. The word he used meant to explore in a careful, scientific manner. His search, however, was doomed from the start, for he again left God out of the picture.

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 2:1 and 2. **ASK:** What did Solomon conclude about pleasure? (Question 9)

Solomon found that pleasure, too, was vanity (2:1). Even though it might produce some temporary laughter, it could not yield lasting satisfaction in life (v. 2).

Solomon attempted to hold on to both wisdom and pleasure (v. 3). He had already found that wisdom leads to greater pain, and he knew that unbridled pleasure would quickly destroy a person. He then tried to see whether pleasure under the control of human wisdom could give him the fulfillment he sought.



He was aware that people live only a short time, and he wanted to see if they could truly enjoy their lives without God.

**READ:** Have learners skim Ecclesiastes 2:1–8. **TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 6 with the right half covered. **ASK:** How does our list of ways people pursue pleasure compare to the ways Solomon pursued pleasure? (Question 10)

In verses 4–8 Solomon listed a sampling of the pleasures that he sought. He designed and constructed architectural masterpieces: houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards and pools.

In addition, he collected a household of servants to maintain his grand scale of living. His holdings in cattle surpassed those of Saul and David, and he accumulated a vast amount of silver and gold. The palace was full of musicians and women. Solomon had arranged for the full range of his pleasures to be indulged at a moment's notice. If pleasure could give satisfaction, Solomon would achieve it.

What did Solomon actually find through all this effort? It was obvious that he was truly great by every common measure (v. 9). He had surpassed his predecessors in power, wealth, culture, and achievements. At the same time his wisdom had stayed with him. He had not cast aside reasonable restraints.

On the positive side of the ledger, Solomon had accomplished many enjoyable things. His construction projects and possessions gave him legitimate joy. By his labor he produced many things that brought him pleasure (v. 10).

Solomon's joy from his efforts was only his "portion" for his work. It was painful for him to realize that his effort cost more than the results he achieved (v. 11). He could have pleasure, but it came at a very high price. Consequently, he concluded that the search for satisfaction through pleasure was "vanity and vexation of spirit."

In 1:3 Solomon asked the book's key question: What profit is left when we subtract life's efforts from life's accomplishments? In pleasure he found some genuine joy, but the enjoyment was not even close to what it cost. Pleasure without God yielded no profit. Once again Solomon was forced to turn away disappointed.

### III. Evaluation (Eccles. 2:12–23)

Solomon evaluated what he had learned from his experiments. He continued to search; and at each stage, he summarized what he had discovered to that point.

#### A. Of wisdom (2:12–17)

Solomon realized that his attempt to find fulfillment in life surpassed what people with ordinary resources could attempt (v. 12).

**READ:** Have the learners skim 1 Kings 10. **ASK:** Based on the record of what Solomon had, is he qualified to give a conclusion about finding fulfillment in wisdom and pleasure? (Question 11)



Solomon's case was a true test to determine once and for all if humans could be satisfied through their own efforts. It would be futile for anyone else to even try.

**BIBLE STUDY:** Instruct students to work with their neighbors to read and summarize Solomon's evaluations of his pursuit of wisdom and pleasure. Assign each pair either Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 (wisdom) or 2:18–23 (pleasure).

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 6. Ask learners who studied Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 to summarize Solomon's evaluation of wisdom. (Record learners' answers on the transparency.) (Question 12)

Searching for Significance		
	Experiments Ecclesiastes 1:16–18	Evaluations Ecclesiastes 2:12–17
Wisdom		
Pleasure		

Solomon asked, "What is the advantage of wisdom over madness and folly?" If wisdom did not lead to the satisfaction he sought, was it any better than foolishness? He answered the question in verses 13 and 14: Wisdom is much better than folly, for the wise man has at least a measure of insight about life, whereas the fool is like one walking in darkness. Profit in life must come through the path of wisdom, not by following foolish impulses.

Nevertheless, Solomon also had to admit the bitter reality that death comes to all. Death is the great leveler of humans. It is unavoidable, and no man, no matter how wise, is exempt from its grip. Unless the issue of death can be surmounted, no amount of human wisdom can bring lasting fulfillment to a person's life.

In verses 15–17 Solomon considered how this observation applied to him. If both wisdom and folly lead to death, then all of his efforts to search for human wisdom were vain. After death, all people—wise and foolish alike—are forgotten. Wisdom required more work, but it yielded no more lasting benefit than folly.

Solomon concluded bitterly that he hated life (v. 17). All feverish effort to understand how life works is painful and frustrating. As Solomon viewed it, life is "vanity and vexation of spirit."

### B. Of pleasure (2:18–23)

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 6. Ask the learners who read Ecclesiastes 2:18–23 to summarize Solomon's evaluation of pleasure. (Record learners' answers on the transparency.) (Question 13)

Searching for Significance		
	Experiments Ecclesiastes 1:16–18	Evaluations Ecclesiastes 2:12–17
Wisdom		
Pleasure		

Solomon continued his gloomy evaluation. Death not only brought a person's work to an end, but it also meant that whatever was achieved faced an uncertain future (v. 18). No one can take earthly pleasures beyond the grave. No doubt, Solomon could point to numerous examples in which sons squan-



dered all their father's accomplishments. That realization of human nature turned his pleasure into pain in his mind.

Solomon asked bitterly whether a man's heirs would use his possessions wisely or foolishly (v. 19). For good or for bad, an heir will have total control of his deceased father's assets. The second generation could completely undo what the prior generation has achieved. This, too, was a frustrating reality of life.

This sobering observation caused Solomon to despair that his work could bring him satisfaction. He knew that he had no choice but to resign himself to the fact that he could not control what even the next generation did. Since that was the case, his life's work could not yield lasting joy.

As Solomon went on to discuss this painful truth in verses 21–23, he found this reality particularly distressing. Even if a person gives his life to all the right things, the cruel pattern of life destroys any hope for genuine joy. All that a person accomplishes he will leave to others, and all that is left to others is liable to be misused. How, then, could Solomon derive pleasure from his activities when the future prospect cast such a shadow over them? Therefore, he said, “This also is vanity and a great evil” (v. 21).

**READ:** Have the learners read 1 Kings 14:21–26.  
**ASK:** When Solomon's son Rehoboam became king, what happened to the treasures that Solomon had so diligently accumulated for his pleasure? (Question 14)

Solomon's son Rehoboam squandered Solomon's achievements (1 Kings 12).

From what Solomon had seen, life was full of labor that produced only vexation of heart (v. 22). All man's activities under the sun lead only to bitterness, regret, and hopelessness. He wondered, “What is the use?” The strain of body and mind necessary to acquire the “good life” is an extravagant price to pay for such a paltry return (v. 23). Even if man were to labor through the night, he could not guarantee the future of what he attained. Both the search for wisdom and the search for pleasure led Solomon to the same place: disillusion and despair.

#### **IV. Exhortation (Eccles. 2:24–26)**

After evaluating what he had found as he examined wisdom and pleasure, Solomon gave a somewhat surprising exhortation in verses 24–26. As he scrutinized life under the sun, he became disappointed. However, at the end of this first round of observation he gave a ray of hope. As he added God to the picture, the faint image of a satisfying life began to emerge.

**ASK:** Put Solomon's conclusion in Ecclesiastes 2:24 in your own words. (Question 15)

In verse 24 Solomon recommended that his readers relax and enjoy life as a gift from God's hand. Solomon's mistake was in trying to find enjoyment only in what he could do or learn. By failing to consider why he was working, he lost the ability to enjoy what he was doing. Solomon did not deny the importance of human labor, but he taught that people must not try to

hang their fulfillment on the slender thread of their own accomplishments. Human achievements can give genuine joy only when seen in the light of God's gracious provision. When people try to get by their own efforts what God alone can give by His goodness, then they will meet with the frustration that Solomon found.

We must seek happiness within the boundaries of God's control over the world. As the creator and sustainer of life, God ultimately controls all human outcomes (v. 26). Within that framework, we are required to work, study, and grow. Nevertheless, we must always remember who we are. We are creatures made by God, and we live by virtue of His gracious oversight. The practical atheism that propelled Solomon's search for fulfillment apart from God (and that characterizes the lives of countless people today) can never lead to fulfillment in God's world.

Solomon continued to describe God's rule over life (v. 26). God is actively involved in bringing joy to the person committed to His way. At the same time, He causes the toil of sinners to produce blessing, not to them, but to those who please Him. In other words, people do not achieve fulfillment by searching for it directly but by surrendering to the God who gives it as His gift.

People see life as meaningless when they try to get enjoyment through their efforts alone. However, with God in the picture there is hope. Life can have meaning. Life can be fulfilling.

## Making It Personal

### Finding Fulfillment

**Ask:** In what or whom, besides God, are you most prone to try to find fulfillment? What have you learned by experience about trying to find fulfillment in something or someone besides God? How will your focus change as a result of the instruction in Ecclesiastes 1 and 2? (Questions 16–18)

Challenge the learners to see all of their endeavors in the light of God's gracious provision. In God we can find fulfillment in life.

### Case Study

Distribute the case study for lesson 3. Have the learners get into groups of four or five and spend 5 minutes working on them. Allow a few minutes for discussion.

### Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Find true enjoyment in life by surrendering to God.

### Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 2:24 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.

