

The Search for Satisfaction

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According to the 2024 World Happiness Report, the U.S. ranks 23rd on a global measure of happiness across 143 countries of the world. This is worse than last year, when we came in at number 15. Americans under 30 are even more dissatisfied with life, with their happiness score dropping to 62nd in the world.

With so much affluence, entertainment options, and ease, why are Americans so unhappy? In her book, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*, Anna Lembke writes:

Compared to our ancestors, we're living in a world of opulence. On the bright side, constant access to all resources and remarkable amenities creates a world of opportunities. On the other hand, this way of living turns many people into dopamine addicts. You're likely one of them. After all, who isn't? With so many temptations being a click away, it's hard not to fall into the trap of overconsumption.

Our society is swimming in various “isms” that are leaving people feeling empty and ultimately unhappy. Here are 10 popular beliefs that come to mind.

1. **Individualism.** Life is all about me, myself, and I.
2. **Materialism.** Material possessions are more important than spiritual values.
3. **Relativism.** There are no objective or absolute truths.
4. **Humanism.** A focus on humanity and human solutions over the divine.
5. **Pluralism.** All beliefs and behaviors are equally valid.
6. **Rationalism.** Opinions and actions are based on reason alone.
7. **Darwinism.** All of life evolved from nothing into something.
8. **Nihilism.** Life is not worth living because it is meaningless.
9. **Escapism.** The seeking of diversions to escape from reality.
10. **Hedonism.** The pursuit of pleasure and sensual self-indulgence as the primary motivation of life.

Several studies confirm that most people today are pursuing a hollow hedonistic lifestyle as they seek enjoyment and pleasure as their top goal. One study showed that 88% of Americans are classified as high in hedonism.

In an article from earlier this year called, *The State of the Culture*, Ted Gioia believes the fastest growing sector of the “culture economy” is distraction, demonstrated through the ceaseless activity of scrolling or swiping (this article is available on Sermon Extras on our website and mobile app – ironically, you’ll have to scroll or swipe to find it).

Our brain rewards these brief bursts of distraction by releasing the neurochemical dopamine, which makes us feel pleasure, leading us to continuously repeat the process in our quest for gratification.

He calls this the “dopamine loop” and pictures it like this:

Stimulus → Dopamine Release → Desire for More → Habit Formation.

To say it another way, distraction leads to pleasure, which leads to reinforcement, ending in addiction. All this leads to a craving for more stimuli, which releases more dopamine, which creates a desire for more, leading the individual into more unholy habits and cycles of sin.

He describes this “dopamine cartel” like a cultural food chain where entertainment swallows art, distraction overtakes entertainment, leading to addiction, which ends up consuming distraction. One reviewer referred to TikTok and other social media apps utilizing brief videos as “digital opium.” As Gioia describes our “dopamine culture,” he writes these startling words: *“The more addicts rely on these stimuli, the less pleasure they receive. At a certain point, this cycle creates ‘anhedonia,’ the complete absence of enjoyment in an experience supposedly pursued for pleasure.”*

That’s what Solomon learned as well. The more he hunted for happiness, the more unhappy he became, concluding that it was like chasing after the wind. Last weekend, we finished Ecclesiastes 1 by learning that *dissatisfaction is designed to lead us to find satisfaction in God alone*. Solomon conducted three experiments by studying the unprofitable work in front of him, the unending world around him, and the unsatisfying wisdom within him. He concluded it was boring and tedious in verse 8: ***“All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.”***

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon puts his search for satisfaction into dopamine hyperdrive as he throws himself into a hedonistic lifestyle. Here’s a general outline which will help guide us through his existential experiments.

- Pleasure (1-3).
- Projects (4-6).
- Possessions (7-8).
- Prestige (9-10).
- Performance (11-12).
- Perspective (13-17).

The more Solomon pursued pleasure, projects, possessions, prestige, and performance, the more he lost perspective on the purpose of life. *We will never find our purpose in life if we put the pursuit of our pleasures above God's priorities.*

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1. Pleasure. In his search for satisfaction, Solomon plunged headlong into pleasure in the first part of verse 1: ***“I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself...’”*** This was a deliberate decision where he determined in his heart to find happiness through hedonism. The phrase ***“come now”*** is a strong imperative which shows he didn't drift into this lurid lifestyle but rather made a deliberate decision to partake of pleasure. The phrase ***“enjoy yourself”*** literally means, *“I will plunge in.”* This is similar to the mindset of the man Jesus described in Luke 12:19 who said, ***“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, drink, be merry.’”***

The word ***“test”*** indicates what follows is an experiment based on personal experience. It didn't take Solomon long to conclude that hedonism is hollow. We see this in the last part of verse 1: ***“But behold, this also was vanity.”*** The word ***“behold”*** conveys vividness and expresses strong feelings. It could be translated, *“Look now!”* The pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is ultimately empty and useless. Hebrews 11:25 refers to Moses who chose ***“rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”***

We don't talk much about this in church, but sin is fun, for a fleeting period of time. Actually, that's *why* we sin. In a post called, *The Rise of Hyper-pleasures*, Samuel Heard writes:

“Several years ago, I was in conversation with a friend of mine, a former addict, who was sharing with me how he felt after a few years of sobriety. His comments to me were unusually candid: ‘I love drugs

— *I still love drugs. I know it sounds crazy, but that's exactly my problem. I wouldn't be an addict if I hated them.*”

Later in the article, the author summarizes a post he read several months earlier where someone asked why it takes meth users years to feel joy again after getting clean: “*Regular people have a happiness scale going from 0-10. Meth makes that scale go all the way to 1,000. Getting a 9/10 is amazing...a 9 out of 1,000 barely registers.*”

To expand the metaphor, our real-life experiences are somewhere between 1 and 10 on the pain/pleasure scale. He calls drugs and alcohol “hyper-pleasures,” because they give us experiences that makes us feel like a 20, 30, 100, 1,000, and so on.

While humans have been utilizing drugs and alcohol for the entirety of our written history, what is new today is the broadening of the kinds of hyper-pleasures available to us: “*Our technological advances mean that hyper-pleasures are always crouching at the door, just within our reach.*” It’s interesting that he uses this phrase because it comes from Genesis 4:7: “***Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it***” (NIV).

Heard fleshes this out in various areas of life. I’ll share just three.

- **Play.** If children sword fighting with sticks gives them an 8, 9 or 10 on the pleasure scale, then video games give them a 20, 30, 100, etc.
- **Reading.** If reading gives us an 8, 9, or 10 on the pleasure scale, then bite-size social media content, curated to be 100% interesting to us, is a 20, 30, 100, etc.
- **Intimacy.** If physical intimacy gives an 8, 9, 10 on the pleasure scale, then internet pornography is a 20, 30, 100, etc.

He concludes: “*But suffice to say, the lid has come off. We know no limits to the kinds and degrees of pleasures available to us...if activity A makes us feel an 8, 9, or 10 and activity B makes us feel like a 20, 30, or 100, all of us will face the temptation to engage in activity B.*”

And yet, even hyper-pleasures leave us ultimately unsatisfied and on the path to addiction. This is reinforced in verse 2: “***I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’***” The word “**mad**” refers to moral perversity. After

listening to stand-up comics and late-show hosts, Solomon concluded that unholy humor didn't fix his hurting heart.

Proverbs 14:13 says, ***“Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief.”*** The question, ***“What use is it?”*** helps us see how laughing through life and pursuing pleasure at all costs doesn't accomplish anything, but actually brings heartache. I think of the sad story of the comedian Robin Williams. He could make other people laugh, but he couldn't find happiness, concluding life was not worth living.

Have you ever thought about what the word “amusement” means? To “muse” means to think; when the letter “a” is put in front, it means to *“not think.”* According to Merriam-Webster, it once meant, *“to divert the attention of; so as to deceive.”* That reminds me of the title of a book I read some time ago called, *“Amusing Ourselves to Death.”*

According to verse 3, Solomon's next experiment is one that is still very popular today: ***“I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine – my heart still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.”*** The word “searched” refers to *“exploring and seeking out.”* Solomon concluded that since life is short, he should party.

This reminds me of the lyrics to a Luke Bryan song, *“So I'm gonna sit right here on the edge of this pier, then watch the sunset disappear and drink a beer.”* Solomon experimented with the finest wines and liquor available from all over the world. But, when the buzz wore off, he was still bummed. Let me add the warning from Solomon in Proverbs 20:1: ***“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”*** As an old evangelist used to say, *“Sin fascinates and then it assassinates; it thrills and then it kills.”*

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2. Projects. After he was over his hangover, his next layover was a massive building project as described in verses 4-6: ***“I made great works. I built houses and 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.”*** Notice everything is in the plural – works, houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, fruit trees, and pools.

When pleasure didn't satisfy, Solomon threw himself into building projects. He designed and constructed several cities and homes. Interestingly, he spent seven years constructing the Temple, while taking 13 years to build his palatial home (that says something about his priorities). He also built a house for his wife (1 Kings 9:14), a house in the Forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 10:17), and stables for 40,000 horses (1 Kings 4:26), the ruins of which remain today.

Solomon also planted vineyards and made **“gardens and parks,”** which were like private resorts. The word **“garden”** can be translated as **“paradise,”** leading some commentators to think Solomon was set on recreating a secular Garden of Eden for himself. Interestingly, he did all that Adam was to do – the verbs **“to plant,” “to water,” “to make”** are the same as those used in Genesis 2, as are the nouns **“garden”** and **“all kinds of fruit trees.”**

Because he had so many fruit trees, he had to make pools in order to irrigate them. Of the various pools mentioned in Scripture (see Nehemiah 2:14), the most celebrated are the “Pools of Solomon,” located between Hebron and Bethlehem, from which an aqueduct was constructed, which still supplies Jerusalem with water.

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3. Possessions. When the pursuit of pleasure and projects left him unsettled and unfulfilled, Solomon decided to purchase possessions in verses 7-8: **“I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.”** Because he constructed so many great works, he needed a great number of workers. He had so much stuff, he had to improve the infrastructure to keep it all going.

In addition, Solomon had more herds and flocks than anyone before him. To get a sense of the magnitude of his possessions, 1 Kings 4:22-23 says, **“Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fattened fowl.”** In our culture, he had more stocks and bonds than Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett combined.

In addition, he accumulated silver and gold through taxes, tribute, and trade. 1 Kings 10:21 describes the opulence of his possessions: ***“All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold...”*** Solomon also hired professional musicians to provide live entertainment.

When none of this satisfied, he turned to the pleasure of intimate relationships. We know from 1 Kings 11:1-3 that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, or mistresses, who were available to him day and night.

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4. Prestige. When wine, women, and song left him feeling empty and unsatisfied, Solomon determined to be the greatest and the most popular person alive. We see this in verses 9-10: ***“So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And 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.”***

This selfish focus on himself is clearly seen in 2:1-17 by the multiple uses of the personal pronouns, “myself,” “me,” “my,” and “I.”

- “Myself” = 4x.
- “Me” = 6x.
- “My” = 12x.
- “I” = 24x!

Solomon’s plan to become the best and the brightest was fulfilled according to 1 Kings 10:23: ***“Thus king Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.”*** Solomon did whatever he could to expand his brand influence on the world stage. However, self-centeredness and self-indulgence never satisfy for long.

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5. Performance. When pursuing prestige left him feeling flat, Solomon focused on something that is still very popular today – his performance. We see this in the

first part of verse 11: ***“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had expended in doing it...”*** The word **“considered”** means, **“to face and look something directly in the eye.”** He turned and looked inward and did an inventory of all his good deeds and how hard he had worked.

This alarming inward look made him realized it was all empty. Let’s pick up the end of verse 11: ***“...and behold, all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was nothing gained under the sun.”*** Verse 12 tells us he did another deep dive into wisdom and folly: ***“So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. What can man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.”***

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6. Perspective. In verse 13, he gained the perspective that living a faithful life of wisdom is better than living a worthless life of folly: ***“Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness...”*** Solomon spelled this out in Proverbs 16:16: ***“How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.”***

He also discovered that death is waiting for both the wise and the foolish. We see this in the last part of verse 14 and verses 15-16: ***“...and yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!”***

When Solomon added it all up and considered his journey into pleasure, projects, possessions, prestige, and performance, his perspective was quite sobering in verse 17: ***“So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after the wind.”*** Solomon found life itself to be repugnant, much like Job declared in Job 10:1: ***“I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.”*** He was bored and bummed out, discouraged and depressed because life was **“grievous”** to him.

Solomon had more money than he could spend, more power than he could wield, more material possessions than he could enjoy, more intimate relationships than he

could handle, more prestige than anyone else, and he worked hard to perform. None of this satisfied him as he found life to be extremely empty, worthless, and meaningless. It was like chasing after the wind.

I think of what former NFL player Tom Brady said in an interview on *60 Minutes* after winning his third Super Bowl (he went on to win seven): *“Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what it is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life...it’s got to be more than this...this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be.”* When the interviewer asked, *“What’s the answer?”* Brady could only say, *“I wish I knew. I wish I knew.”*

Our unsatisfied longings under the sun are a clue that we were made to find our satisfaction in the Son who is Savior.

As the Searcher neared the end of his extravagant excursion, he realized that many of his fantasies had turned out to be nothing more than bad dreams. Solomon was looking for something of substance in life. Nothing ultimately satisfied. It’s as if he woke up one day and looked around. There were wine bottles all over the floor of his beautiful home. Live music was playing, and women were everywhere. Each room of his house was filled with artifacts from around the world. As he looked out the window over his immaculately landscaped yard, he said to himself, *“This is crazy. There must be more to this life. I’m on a dead-end road here.”*

I suspect some of you feel the same way Solomon did as you realize how your life lacks meaning and purpose. Those things that you always thought would bring you happiness – pleasure, projects, possessions, prestige, and performance have left you feeling empty. It’s like chasing after the wind. You can’t seem to get hold of that which will ultimately provide your life with meaning. Everything you’ve tried has left you feeling blah, bored, and bummed out.

Action Steps

1. Read Ecclesiastes at least three times this summer.

2. Repent from trying to find fulfillment apart from God. To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, every worldly pleasure you are pursuing is *“doomed to final frustration.”* It’s time to repent by refusing to pursue sinful pleasures because they will fail to provide what you hope they will, and they will also put your own soul at risk.

3. Determine that lasting satisfaction only comes from God. God is resplendent with glory and goodness. Why should we pursue anything else? Psalm 16:11: ***“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”***

4. Receive Jesus Christ as your Savior. Let’s go back to a passage I referenced, Luke 12:19: ***“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”*** This man, like Solomon, was living out a hedonistic lifestyle. Let’s not forget what comes next in Luke 12:20-21: ***“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”***

This makes me think of the lyrics to the classic song “I’d Rather Have Jesus,” often sung by George Beverly Shea at Billy Graham crusades.

*I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold.
I’d rather be His than have riches untold.
I’d rather have Jesus than houses or lands.
I’d rather be led by His nail-pierced hands
Than to be the king of a vast domain and be held in sin’s dread sway.
I’d rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.*

Invitation

Mexico Commissioning