

**“I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility. . . . So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.” —Ecclesiastes 2:1, 17**

In his classic allegory, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan tells the story of a pilgrim named “Christian” on his way “from this world to that which is to come.” Christian is joined along the way by a companion, Faithful, who is also on his way to the Celestial City. Their path takes them through a town specifically founded by enemies to ensnare pilgrims with the best pleasures and possessions the world has to offer. Bunyan calls this town “Vanity,” and its key attraction is “Vanity Fair.” Bunyan writes,

Then I saw in my dream, that when Christian and Faithful had left the wilderness, they soon saw a town ahead of them named Vanity. At that town there is a fair called Vanity Fair, and it is kept open all the year long. It bears the name of Vanity Fair, because the town where it is held is lighter than vanity—and also because all that is sold there is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!”

This fair is no newly-erected business—but a thing of ancient standing. I will show you its origin: Almost five thousand years ago, there were Pilgrims journeying to the Celestial City such as these two honest people. Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, along with their companions, perceived by the path which the Pilgrims made, that their way to the City lay through this town of Vanity. They therefore contrived to set up a fair here in which all sorts of vanity should be sold, and that it should last all the year long.

Therefore all kinds of merchandise are sold at this fair—such as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts—such as harlots, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. Moreover, at this fair are always to be seen juggling, cheats, games, plays, fools, fakes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind. Here are to be seen also, and without cost—thefts, murders, adulteries and liars! . . .

Now these Pilgrims, as I said, had to go through this fair—and so they did. . . .

As they make their way through the city, Christian and Faithful are noticed by the residents because of their strange clothing, unusual speech, and lack of interest in the fair’s merchandise. They are arrested, a trial is convened, and they are both condemned to death. Faithful is executed, but Christian manages to escape from the city and continue on his way.

In arriving at Ecclesiastes 2, we come to Solomon’s real-life story of his journey through the city of Vanity. He arrives here having spent time in the ivory tower of human philosophy (1:12–18). He had sought answers there in response to the troublesome reality of life’s fleetingness (1:2–11). But having tested all the intellectual resources available in that tower, Solomon found no answers to the enigmas of life. He sums up the powerlessness of these resources to relieve him of his burden with the following verdict: “And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind” (1:17).

It is this on-going search for answers that propels Solomon next to investigate the merchandise for sale in the city of Vanity. Unlike Christian and Faithful, who try to get through the city without being noticed or distracted, Solomon arrives at the city purposefully, intent on sampling all the wares its fair has to offer. But at the end, having visited every booth, Solomon’s despair is only intensified: “So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind” (2:17).

Solomon’s recounting of his visit to this figurative city is of crucial importance for men today. There are many who are either done with the ivory tower of intellectualism or have no interest in trying to find satisfaction there. But they are on their way headstrong to the city of Vanity—or may already even be there, sampling the fair’s merchandise in the attempt to find long-term meaning and satisfaction in life. Solomon sends a warning: “I’ve already been there. I’ve tried its goods. It’s all an illusion. Stay away!”

## I. The Lust of the Flesh (2:1–3)

- **Ecclesiastes 2:1–3** – “I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility. I said of laughter, ‘It is madness,’ and of pleasure, ‘What does it accomplish?’ I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.”

Disappointed with the results of his intellectual experiment, Solomon now turns to the path of **“pleasure”** (v. 1)—or more specifically, **the path of enjoyment**. The Legacy Standard Bible’s translation of verse 1 is helpful: “I said in my heart, ‘I will test you with gladness so that you will see good things.’” Instead of seeking the Lord through prayer, Solomon describes his experiment in the form of a monologue—“I said to *myself*”—emphasizing again the on-going self-centeredness of his investigation (see also 1:16).

In his experiment with fleshly enjoyments, Solomon first tries **“laughter”** or **“merriment”** (v. 2). He looks to **comedy** to provide relief to the dilemma of life’s brevity. Indeed, laughter can be much-needed medicine to the soul (Prov 17:22). But the kind of laughter described here is *not* the joy of the Lord—the joy of a life contented with and happy about God. It is better understood as **a form of escape**—a way to retreat from the problems of life. It is as if Solomon thinks, “If I can just laugh more, I’ll feel better!” But as he goes on to acknowledge, comedy provides no such relief. In the end, it actually compounds the bitterness. As Sinclair Ferguson writes, “The pleasures of laughter can also be the gratification of cruelty, even an expression of hatred or jealousy. But most of the time the truth is that laughter is simply empty” (*The Pundit’s Folly*, 12). Ultimately, the fleetingness of life is no laughing matter.

Solomon also tries **“wine”** (v. 3). He experiments with alcohol for two purposes: (1) **“to stimulate his body”** with feelings of pleasure (alcohol triggers the brain to produce dopamine, a chemical that provides energy and pleasurable feelings); and (2) **“to take hold of folly”**—i.e., to experience the numbing effects of alcohol. But Solomon indicates here that he does not abandon himself to drunken stupors. He understands that unrestrained gratification with all its consequences would be destructive; memory lapses and hangovers would be most counter-intuitive to his investigation. Instead, he experiments with stimulation **“while my mind was guiding me wisely”** (v. 3). He doesn’t find some trashy bar in which he can pass out on the floor from drunkenness. Instead, he goes to the fancy wine tasting boutiques to sip and ponder. He imbibes enough to feel really good, but not enough to lose his mind.

But although alcohol acts as a stimulant when it is first ingested, it turns out in the long run to be a depressant. To both laughter and alcohol, Solomon concludes: “And behold, it too was futility. . . . It is madness! . . . What does it accomplish?” (vv. 1–3). Neither of these provided solutions. They only increased the burden.

## II. The Lust of the Eyes (2:4–8)

- **Ecclesiastes 2:4–8** – “I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.”

In addition to sampling the pleasures of the flesh, Solomon sampled the pleasure of the eyes. He focuses on accumulating wealth, building edifices, displaying creative genius, assembling orchestras, showcasing choirs, and establishing his own in-house beauty pageant of hundreds of mistresses. The language of this section, particularly that of the gardens, is reminiscent of the Creation account (Genesis 1–2). **As every man does when he seeks to find significance through the lust of the eyes, Solomon sought to recreate Eden—the very context from which sinful man had to be expelled.**

What Solomon describes in Ecclesiastes 2:4–8 harmonizes exactly with what is known of his endeavors from 1 Kings 1–11. For example:

- 1 Kings 7:1–12
- 1 Kings 9:10–22
- 1 Kings 10:1–29
- 1 Kings 11:1–3

Rather than giving Solomon *true significance*, these things only pulled his affection from the Lord and compounded his despair. As Curtis writes, “In this case [the Preacher’s] efforts to re-create paradise have not led to something that is ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31) but to *hebel* and the discovery that there is nothing to be gained under the sun” (Curtis, *Ecclesiastes*).

### III. The Boastful Pride of Life (2:9–11)

- **Ecclesiastes 2:9–10** – “Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.”

Solomon summarizes the crowning achievement of his experiment in vv. 9–10. He was able to gratify every desire—not in reckless abandonment but with careful, intelligent assessment. **“I became great and increased more than all”** demonstrates the pride inherent in the midst of his confusion. He achieved what he did not out of true strength, from being motivated by that which is *above the sun*. He achieved what he did in desperation, from being motivated by everything *under the sun*. His initial conclusion was favorable: the pursuit of these things brought reward—a euphoria for what he was able to accomplish. But the thrill did not last long.

- **Ecclesiastes 2:11** – “Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.”

Verse 11 provides Solomon’s final assessment after the euphoria passed. What once appeared so promising lost its luster. It did not bring lasting satisfaction or provide true significance for a fleeting life. Solomon describes the aftertaste with three descriptions applicable to **“all”** of his endeavors. They were:

- 1) **“vanity”** (*hebel*) – a vapor that vanishes quickly;
- 2) **“striving after the wind”** – trying to chase or coral the wind; and
- 3) **“no profit under the sun”** – no lasting gain.

### IV. The Emptiness of It All (2:12–17)

Having reached another dead end, Solomon takes a step back and retreats again to wisdom (see 1:17).

- **Ecclesiastes 2:12** – “So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done?”

Solomon here leaves an important message for posterity. He gives sworn testimony that nothing more can be done in this experiment in Vanity Fair. The investigation has been exhaustive. As Whybray notes, “The moral is obvious: **what was true in the life of the world’s most privileged person is bound to be true of the lives of us all**. This is a warning not to treat the acquisition of wealth and power as the most important goal in life” (“Qoheleth as Theologian,” 261). Sadly, too men disregard Solomon’s conclusions. Ignoring his warning they set off for Vanity Fair convinced it still has something good to offer, only to find themselves later in a deep ditch, despairing of life.

- **Ecclesiastes 2:13–14a** – “And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.”

In his reflection on the experiment, Solomon does recognize **a relative value of man-centered wisdom for this life** (the same kind described in 1:12–18). Reckless abandonment into indulgence and stupidity is like blindness: your satisfaction will be short; your fall will catch you off guard; your pain will be extreme. On the other hand, a prudent and sober approach to life will provide better enjoyment: your satisfaction will be longer, you will avoid the pitfalls; your pain will be mitigated.

- **Ecclesiastes 2:14b–16** – “And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, ‘As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?’ So I said to myself, ‘This too is vanity.’ For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!”

But once again, Solomon is faced with **the great equalizer: death** (see 1:4, 11). Though they take different paths, the indulgent fool *and* the disciplined wise man arrive at the same destination—**the grave**. Wisdom cannot prevent it. Once again, Solomon is brought back to the same problem that gnawed at this soul: the fleetingness of life. Death equalizes fools and sages alike—and it liquidates even the memories of them from those who live after them.

- **Ecclesiastes 2:17** – “So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.”

Solomon’s despair is intense. He has sought to solve the dilemmas of life in a world subjected to the curse (Gen 3:17–19; Rom 8:20) by appealing to the resources of that cursed world itself—in this case, to *pleasure* (2:1). That will not do. Seeking significance from what is “under the sun” leads only to despair. Yet even in these words of Solomon there is hope, and the Preacher is not done yet. The pain he experiences is a gift. It will propel him to turn his gaze upward to have the joy of his salvation restored. He will not perish in the ditch outside of Vanity Fair.

### Hear the Preacher!

1. You’re not going to be able to try the same experiment Solomon did and arrive at a different conclusion.
2. Flight from reality into pleasure is not the answer; it never delivers on what it promises.
3. You need something more in life to live for than the enjoyment of pleasure.
4. What you live for must provide significance not *in spite of* life’s fleetingness, but *because of* it.

### For Discussion

1. Read Hebrews 3:13. Why does the writer speak of sin as “deceitful”?
2. Solomon sought escape through comedic relief and stimulants (lusts of the flesh). Why are these common responses to the problem of life’s fleetingness? Why are they alluring?
3. Solomon also sought escape through achievements (lusts of the eyes). Where have you seen this temptation in your life? What are some means of grace/spiritual disciplines to use to fight this temptation?

### For Further Study

1. Do you have practices that you use to “escape” like Solomon (comedy, stimulants; see 2:1–3) in order deal with some troublesome burden in your life? What is it that you are trying to escape? In light of Solomon’s testimony, are you now going to mortify that kind of response to life’s difficulties? How?
2. Sing through the hymn, “My Worth Is Not in What I Own” (*Hymns of Grace* #98). How does this hymn help entrench the lessons learned from Solomon’s autobiography in Ecclesiastes 2:1–17?
3. What is the difference between finding significance *in spite of* life’s fleetingness, rather than *because of* it.

**Audio, Video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** October 18, 7pm – “The Leader’s Authority” (“Called to Lead” Mini-Series, part 2)