

Men *of the* **Word**

Searching for Significance

A Study in
Ecclesiastes

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

All That Is in the World

Ecclesiastes 2:1–17

“VANITY FAIR” IN JOHN BUNYAN’S *PILGRIM’S PROGRESS*



“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! . . .”

REVIEW & INTRODUCTION

- In 1:12–18, Solomon recounted his search for significance through *human wisdom* exercised *with self* as the standard and *for self* as the goal.
- Solomon discovered that from a human perspective, no amount of wisdom can solve the dilemma of life's brevity and bring true satisfaction.
 - **1:17** – “And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind.”
- Beginning in 2:1, Solomon tells of a new experiment—one that involves an escape into the *senses* to try to find significance.
- Solomon leaves the ivory tower of philosophy to try his experiment in *Vanity Fair*—to search for significance in *all that is in the world*.

“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh
and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life,
is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

—1 John 2:16

I. The Lust of the Flesh Ecclesiastes 2:1–3

*"I said to myself,
"Come now, I will test
you with pleasure.
So enjoy yourself.'"*



- **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.”
- Solomon resorts now to the path of *pleasure*.
- He describes his experiment in the form of a monologue (not a *prayer*)—“I said to myself”—emphasizing again (see 1:16) the on-going self-centeredness of his investigation.
- LSB: “I said in my heart, ‘I will test you with gladness so that you will see good things.’”

The Preacher “was trying out not just pleasure but the pursuit of pleasure. . . . In other words, he was trying out the pursuit of pleasure with the goal of having enjoyment so as to test (evaluate) whether the pursuit of pleasure is worth it.”

—Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 41

hedonist

/hé·don·ist/

noun

a person who believes that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important thing in life; a pleasure-seeker

Men of the Word

- Solomon first tries “laughter,” “merriment,” or “comedy” (v. 2).
- Certainly, laughter can be medicine to the soul (Prov 17:22).
- But laughter here is better understood as a form of escape—a retreat from the pressing issues of reality.
- “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” (Ferguson, *The Pundit’s Folly*, 12).
- The fleetingness of life is no laughing matter.



- Solomon also tries *stimulants*—“wine” (v. 3).
- **2:3** – “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.”
- He experiments with alcohol: (1) “to stimulate his body”; and (2) “to take hold of folly.”
- He does so “while my mind was guiding me wisely”—i.e., not in total abandonment, but measured stages while maintaining intellectual awareness.
- He gets as close to drunkenness (“folly”) as possible while still maintaining his wits—to see if the burden would somehow fall away.

“We call it ‘pleasure-seeking,’ but the truth is we should really call it ‘escapism.’ It exists in a dozen guises, only one of which is alcoholic. The reality from which we take flight also exists in many forms: we flee from our own failure, from a marriage or relationship gone sour, from the past, from the future, from the present, from our inability to exercise self-control—or from a hundred other dissatisfactions. . . . The excitement of ‘an affair’ . . . at whatever level, may seem to help us forget the failures in our marriage; other disappointments may be compensated for by over-drinking, over-eating, even over-exposure to TV soaps.



Whatever we substitute for facing up to reality, we learn the hard way that flight is not the answer. It leaves us with the same gnawing emptiness with which we started.” —Ferguson, *The Pundit’s Folly*, 15

- **2:1–3** – “. . . And behold, it too was futility. . . . It is madness! . . . What does it accomplish?”
- Seeking pleasure and stimulation in and of themselves, or to escape from life’s problems leads to disappointment *every time*—even when it is carefully monitored, with your mind “guiding wisely” (v. 3).
- The wanton abandonment into these things increases the pain exponentially.
- You cannot laugh or drink away toward significance.

II. The Lust of the Eyes Ecclesiastes 2:4–8

*"I enlarged my works:
I built houses for
myself, I planted
vineyards for myself."*



- **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.”
- Solomon now looks outside of himself to try to find solutions in a resume of achievements—things the eyes could behold.
- Solomon’s achievements represent the desires of all men’s hearts; *he tries to recreate Eden to solve his soul’s dilemma.*

- **1 Kings 7:1–7** – “Now Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished all his house. He built the house of the forest of Lebanon; its length was 100 cubits and its width 50 cubits and its height 30 cubits, on four rows of cedar pillars with cedar beams on the pillars. It was paneled with cedar above the side chambers which were on the 45 pillars, 15 in each row. There were artistic window frames in three rows, and window was opposite window in three ranks. All the doorways and doorposts had squared artistic frames, and window was opposite window in three ranks. Then he made the hall of pillars; its length was 50 cubits and its width 30 cubits, and a porch was in front of them and pillars and a threshold in front of them. He made the hall of the throne where he was to judge, the hall of judgment, and it was paneled with cedar from floor to floor. . . .

- **1 Kings 10:14–20** – “Now the weight of gold which came in to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides that from the traders and the wares of the merchants and all the kings of the Arabs and the governors of the country. King Solomon made 200 large shields of beaten gold, using 600 shekels of gold on each large shield. He made 300 shields of beaten gold, using three minas of gold on each shield, and the king put them in the house of the forest of Lebanon. Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with refined gold. There were six steps to the throne and a round top to the throne at its rear, and arms on each side of the seat, and two lions standing beside the arms. Twelve lions were standing there on the six steps on the one side and on the other; nothing like it was made for any other kingdom.”

- **1 Kings 10:21–23** – “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. None was of silver; it was not considered valuable in the days of Solomon. For the king had at sea the ships of Tarshish with the ships of Hiram; once every three years the ships of Tarshish came bringing gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks. So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.”
- **1 Kings 11:1–3** – “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh . . . from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, ‘You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.’ Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away.”

- Rather than giving Solomon *true significance*, these things only pulled his affection from the Lord and compounded his pain.
- “In this case Qoheleth’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*, 2:11).
- “Our desires are never satisfied; we go from one well to another seeking water to quench our thirst. But the wells of the pleasure-seekers are empty. This explains why the pleasure-seekers can never be pleasure-keepers” (Ferguson, *The Pundit’s Folly*, 17).
- Some men pursue greatness not because they are great, but because they are empty.

III. The Boastful Pride of Life Ecclesiastes 2:9–11

*"Then I became great
and increased more
than all who preceded
me in Jerusalem."*



- **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 his crowning achievement in vv. 9–10 —“I tasted everything I wanted; I refused myself nothing.”
- He was able to gratify every desire—not in reckless abandonment but with inquisitiveness and thoughtful assessment.
- His initial response was favorable: the pursuit of pleasure brought a euphoria for the moment—but that was the problem.

- **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 the final assessment in light of careful examination.
- Solomon describes the aftertaste with three descriptions to “all” of his endeavors:
 - 1) “vanity” – *hebel*, a vapor that vanishes quickly.
 - 2) “striving after the wind” – trying to chase or coral the wind.
 - 3) “no profit under the sun” – no lasting gain.

“All the sumptuous banqueting, the magnificent edifices, the delightful vineyards, parks, and pleasure-grounds, the charming streams, the splendid retinue of servants, the numerous herds, the costly treasures, the enchanting music, the amorous delights, and the complete gratification of every desire, so minutely and forcibly described in 3–10, were utterly insufficient to quiet the mind craving after higher enjoyments, and to secure lasting happiness, and thus the pursuit after pleasure, like wisdom, proved mere vanity and striving after the wind.”

—Ginsberg, *Cohemoth*, 287

*But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white—then melts for ever;
Or like the Borealis race,
That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.*

—Robert Burns



IV. The Emptiness of It All Ecclesiastes 2:12–17

*“So I hated life, for
the work which had been
done under the sun was
grievous to me.”*



- Having reached a dead end, Solomon takes a step back and retreats to wisdom (1:17).
- **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?”
- Nothing more can be done; the experiment has been exhausted.
- “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” (Whybray, “Qoheleth as Theologian,” 261).

- Solomon does recognize a *relative* value of man-centered wisdom for this life.
- **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.”
- On the one hand, reckless abandonment into illicit indulgence and stupidity is like blindness: your satisfaction will be short; your fall will be great; 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.

- But once again, we are faced with the great equalizer: *death*.
- **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!”
- Though they take different paths, both the fool and the wise man arrive at the same destination—the grave. Wisdom cannot prevent it.
- Death not only equalizes, it liquidates—even the memories from those who live.



“Thus it is death that destroys the distinction between the wise and the fool and makes the advantage that wisdom has over folly to be a relative advantage. Wisdom fails to give the wise person any ultimate advantage over the fool because death wipes out the distinction between the two.”

—Richard Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 113

- Having reached another dead end, Solomon expresses deep frustration.
- **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.”
- Yet even in these words there is hope, and the Preacher is not done yet.
- Pain is the gift nobody wants, but the health of the soul is dependent upon it.
- Solomon’s conclusion at this point is not the destination, but it is the powerful motivation to return to God.

Hear the Preacher!

*"The words of wise
men are like goads . . ."*



In response to the longing of your soul, recognize:

1. You're not going to be able to try the same experiment 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; it is but a vapor.
4. What you live for must provide significance not *in spite of* life's fleetingness, but *because of* it.

“O Christ in Thee My Soul Hath Found”
(Frances Bevan)

I tried the broken cisterns, ah!
But how the waters failed;
even as I stooped to drink they fled,
and mocked me as I wailed.

Now none but Christ can satisfy,
none other name for me!
There's love and life and lasting joy,
Christ Jesus, found in thee.

A black and white photograph of an open book with a hand turning a page. The background is dark, and the text is overlaid in white. The book is open, showing the pages, and a hand is visible on the left side, turning a page. The text "Men of the Word" is overlaid in the center.

Men *of the* Word

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