

The Bonfire of the Vanities “Pleasure’s Folly” Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Introduction

- [Video]
- [Slide #1] There is meaning in this life. It exists. Just not under the sun. Just not on this earth. And certainly not in pleasure. If in your search for meaning, for purpose, for a reason for living, is limited to what feels good, the buzz, the high, at the end of the day, at the end of your life you’ll find yourself empty—wanting something more.
- Listen. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. *I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. 2 "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.*
- *4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.*
- *10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.*
- Jimmy Buffett’s question, "What if the Hokey Pokey is all it really is about?" That’s Qoheleth’s question here in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. Can the meaning of life be found in seeking pleasure? And the Teacher’s answer is no.

Transition

Although we sure try...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Pursuing pleasure apart from God is meaningless**
- In the previous section wisdom and knowledge hit the flames. Now it’s pleasure’s turn. Qoheleth throws pleasure on the bonfire. Under the sun, on this earth, apart from God, hedonism, devotion to pleasure as a way of life, fails in every way. As a pursuit it is meaningless. Vanity. A mist. A vapor. Grasping at straws. Chasing after the wind.
- Of all the things in this book I believe this section gets at the core of who we are as people more than any other thing. Or as Blaise Pascal puts it, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended

with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves.”¹

- We are a nation and a church of pleasure seekers on a quest for our own happiness. Or as Titus 3:3 says, we are *enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures*. Most of what we put in front of our eyes whether on TV or movies or magazines, most of what we want to experience after work and on the weekend, most of what we’re seeking after in a good meal, is pleasure. We are walking, talking over developed pleasure receptors in constantly in need of stimulus. And Qoheleth says, “if you think pursuing pleasure will bring meaning to life, you’re wrong.” It won’t. Pleasure can’t give meaning to life. Pursuing it, questing after it apart from God will always leave you empty.

Transition

Before we look more closely at what Qoheleth says here about the bankruptcy of pleasure let me say something about the difference between happiness and pleasure.

Background/Setting

- They are not the same. The Hebrew word for pleasure never means happiness in Ecclesiastes.² So what is happiness?
- “The tired farmer has finished his long day in the vineyards. The sun is going down. He sits down under one of the many fig trees surrounding his humble house. His wife, who spent the day in the field alongside her husband, sits down beside him. Looking into the valley below at the fruitful vines, they reflect that this has been a good year. The crop is thriving. They gave birth to their third child. The king, a faithful servant of [God], has finally secured the borders and guaranteed the peace and safety of his people.”³ That’s happiness Old Testament style. Qoheleth is not against happiness. God is not against your happiness.
- Pleasure, on the other hand, is something completely different. In the words of one commentator, “Pleasure is not an independent emotion or sensation, but an experience or...a ‘feeling-tone’ attached to a more comprehensive experience.”⁴ Pleasure is the feeling attached to the act of, one by one, dipping the Oreo cookies into the milk and eating them until the whole bag is gone. Pleasure is the feeling attached to an experience.
- Qoheleth is not against pleasure either. In fact, God is not against pleasure. “God is not a celestial Scrooge who hopes that his creatures are unhappy.”⁵ God created pleasure. What God is against, and what Qoheleth warns us of here, is the pursuit of pleasure—apart from God—as a source of meaning. These questions...What is life about? What’s the point? Why are we here? What’s my purpose? Pleasure can’t, pleasure won’t ever answer those questions.

Transition

Look at [verses 1-3](#). Qoheleth tests himself in a number of areas to see if meaning can be found in certain pleasurable experiences. [[Slide #3](#)] In verses 1-3 its **laughter and alcohol**. Look at the

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), 113, thought #425.

² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up*, p. 115.

³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 363.

⁴ Fox, p. 113.

⁵ DBI, p. 653.

text. *I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. 2 "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.*

Main Points

- When was this book written? Not 2008? I'm not sure what else can be said. Basically Qoheleth makes up this brilliant plan to get wasted and to laugh as much as he can. If he were carrying out his plan right now he'd have the beer bong in one hand, and *Family Guy*, or *30 Rock*, or *The Office*, or *Scrubs* on TV. And he would do similar kinds of things day after day, weekend after weekend.
- And he worked at it. [Verse 10](#) says Qoheleth toiled, he labored to find the best laughs, the best buzz. *I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.*
- Notice, he doesn't say the things he experienced weren't pleasurable. They are. That's not the point. His question is, "are they meaningful?" [Verse 3](#). *I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.* Are they really worthwhile pursuits? Where do they lead? Can you build a life around laughter and alcohol?
- And his answer is no. They ultimately prove to be meaningless. They are chasing after the wind. There is no net advantage gained. *Nothing was gained under the sun*, [verse 11](#). The buzz eventually goes away. The laughs end after twenty-three minutes and you're right back where you started.
- What would Qoheleth say to us? To the MTV generation that goes from one pleasurable experience to another? What would he say to the twenty percent of young adults in this country who have tried marijuana by age 15?⁶ What would he say to those whose first task at 5 o'clock Friday afternoon is the case of cold ones? What would he say about living for the weekend? He'd say "why?"

Transition

Look at [verses 4-11](#) and all the other pleasurable experiences Qoheleth tests himself with. *I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained*

⁶ Anne R. Carvey and Alejandro Gonzalez's "Nations with High Pot Use," *USA Today* (8-13-08)

under the sun. [Slide #4] Qoheleth says **creativity, wealth, sex, entertainment**, if pursued as ends in themselves, are bankrupt.

- **Verses 4-6** highlight Qoheleth's creative pursuits. Grand building projects. Gardens. Vineyards. Arboretums. Parks. He didn't build for philanthropic reasons.⁷ He exercised his creativity for the purpose of making himself feel good. Is there ultimate meaning in being creative?
- **Verses 7-8** highlight his massive wealth. More than any other person, Qoheleth was able to buy every single thing he imagined could make him happy. The guy was filthy rich with enough money to buy slaves who then had more slaves. He had livestock galore. He amassed the equivalent of a Swiss bank account, silver and gold, *the treasure of kings and provinces*, he says. There's this intense, self-centered drive for acquisition, this obsessive quest to fill a massive craving. He wanted to see if meaning could be found in what you earn, what you have.
- He entertained himself. *I acquired men and women singers*. He had women. *A harem as well--the delights of the heart of man*. He had lots of women. He used women for sexual pleasure.
- **Verse 10**. He says, *I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure*. He pursued it all. If it felt good he tried it. If it yielded pleasure, he did it. He lived life to the full.
- And then came the morning after. **Verse 11**. *Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun*.
- The end result is no advantage, no profit. You end up right back where you start. The good feelings go away. *Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything under the sun, pursuing pleasure apart from God is meaningless*. It's chasing after the wind.

Conclusion

- Here's the deal. Listen to me. Pleasure isn't the problem. Pursuing a life of pleasure is not wrong. The problem is that we pursue illegitimate false pleasures—unsatisfying, unfulfilling bastard pleasures such as the ones Qoheleth lists here. God is not against pleasure. He created pleasure. The Bible is full of the language of pleasure. God wants your happiness. Pleasure isn't the problem.
- The problem is that we are far too easily pleased. **C.S. Lewis** says it like this. “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”⁸
- Commenting on Lewis's words **John Piper** observes, “The great problem of human beings is that they are far too easily pleased. They don't seek pleasure with nearly the resolve and

⁷ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 90.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), p.1-2.

passion that they should. And so they settle for mud pies instead of infinite delight. Our mistake lies not in the intensity of our desire for happiness but in the weakness of it.”⁹

- What Qoheleth does for us is expose the folly, the vanity of all the mud pies under the sun, on this earth, so that our eyes might be opened to the offer of a holiday at the sea. God himself is that offer. We set our sights too low. If we were really serious about seeking pleasure we’d seek after Him. Psalm 37:4 *Delight yourself in the LORD*. God is the greatest pleasure to be pursued. Qoheleth’s message is this. “The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God. Not from God, but in God.”¹⁰ Pursue him and you will know what it really means to live life to the full. Pray with me.

⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 20.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 28.