

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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by William D. Barrick, Th.D.
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary

Chapter 2: A Disappointing Discovery Continued: From **experience**, the Preacher **learned that man is powerless** (1:1–2:26)

People often claim that education resolves almost every conceivable problem that individuals and communities face. If only everyone had a better and higher education, so the argument goes, there would be no political instability, international tension, teen pregnancies, and hospital wards filled with patients suffering from stress and chronic depression. A college or university degree in hand, graduates are supposedly prepared to storm the heights of mankind's loftiest advancements to solve the worst of mankind's problems. Solomon certainly does not find that human wisdom can supply the solution to his personal depression. Life's most profound and psyche-wracking problems remain unresolved after the best of man's wisdom tackles them. Thus, Solomon turns to another potential means for defeating depression and death: unfettered pleasure.

In Pursuit of Pleasure (2:1–9)

Pleasure for Solomon involves play (2:1–3), property and parks (vv. 4–6), and possessions (vv. 7–8)—or, put another way, **entertainment, edifices, and earnings**. He has already tried **erudition**.

Ancient Near Eastern peoples expected their kings to accomplish much during their reigns. Their own inscriptions tend to list their accomplishments as evidence that they had ruled well and had provided the benefits their subjects required for a healthy and happy existence. Much of it sounds a lot like politics in our own day:

I (am) Mesha, son of Chemosh-[. . .], king of Moab, . . .

And I built Baal-meon, making a reservoir in it, and I built Qaryaten. . . .

It was I (who) built Qarhoh, the wall of *the forests* and the wall of the citadel; I also built its gates and I built its towers and I built the king's house, and I made both of its reservoirs for water inside the town. . . . And I cut *beams* for Qarhoh with Israelite captives. I built Aroer, and I made the highway in the Arnon (valley); I built Beth-bamoth, for it had been destroyed; I built Bezer—for it lay in ruins . . .¹

Hammurabi, king of Babylon (ca. 1728–1686 BC), commemorates his accomplishments by means of various dating formulas employed to refer to each year of his reign. He

¹ W. F. Albright, trans., "The Moabite Stone," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 320–21. Date of inscription: approximately 830 BC (cf. 2 Kgs 3:4 and its mention of Mesha).

identifies each of his 43 years as king by what he established, constructed, or restored, or whom he defeated. The following provides a partial listing:

1. Hammurabi (became) king. . . .
3. He constructed a throne . . .
4. The wall of (the sacred precinct) Gagia was built.
5. He constructed . . .
9. The canal (called) Hammurabi-hegal (was dug). . . .
25. The great wall of Sippar was built
33. He redug the canal (called) “Hammurabi-(spells)-abundance-for-the-people, the Beloved-of-Anu-and-Enlil,” (thus) he provided Nippur, Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Uruk (and) Isin with a permanent and plentiful water supply . . .
34. He built the temple . . . for Anu, Inanna and Nana.²

In light of Mesha’s and Hammurabi’s claims, Solomon’s list of accomplishments (Eccl 2:4–9) run according to expectations. The difference, however, consists of the fact that Mesha and Hammurabi speak as though they are fully satisfied with their lives, but *Solomon confesses that all such accomplishments bring him no lasting satisfaction*. Why the difference? Solomon worships the true God while Mesha and Hammurabi worship idols. Their idolatry causes them no loss of sleep, but Solomon’s does. *One who knows the true and living God can never be satisfied merely with what this world offers*.

Solomon knows better than to pin his hope on things under the sun.

An interpretive problem. Ancient versions and modern translations alike exhibit uncertainty in the translation of 2:8. The NKJV’s translation (“musical instruments of all kinds”) contrasts with that of NAU and NRSV (“many concubines”). The Hebrew words are somewhat obscure, but some scholars have related them to a word meaning “breast,” indicating a colloquialism for women who provide pleasure.³ The Hebrew could be related to an Akkadian term meaning “mistress” or “lady.”⁴ A letter from Pharaoh Amenhotep III (ca. 1417–1353 BC) to Milkilu prince of Gezer demanding 40 concubines employs a very similar term in a Canaanite explanatory note. In order to make certain that the prince and his court understood the Egyptian term for concubine, the scribe inserted the Canaanite word.⁵ Some Jewish versions prefer to follow the Mishnah’s rendering of the term as a “chest” or “treasure chest.”⁶

Judges 5:30 uses a very similar phraseology (“A maiden, two maidens”).⁷ The phrase involves a singular and a dual form of the noun that could also be translated “womb”—“a womb, two wombs.” Applying the same grammatical treatment to 2:8 results in something like “a breast, even [two] breasts.” Finally, the text indicates that

² A. Leo Oppenheim, trans., “Texts from Hammurabi to the Downfall of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 269–70. Date of inscription: approximately 1750 BC.

³ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 292. ERV, RSV, and TEV offer this interpretation.

⁴ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 17. See, also, Derek Kidner, “The Search for Satisfaction, Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26,” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 252 fn 5.

⁵ W. F. Albright and George E. Mendenhall, trans., “The Amarna Letters: RA, xxxi” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. by James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 487.

⁶ Thus, the NJPS translation, “as well as the luxuries of commoners—coffers and coffers of them.”

⁷ Judg 5 is a very ancient Hebrew poem. That Eccl 2:8 employs a similar construction proves antagonistic to the view that Ecclesiastes was written late in Hebrew history. Cf. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 259 fn 32.

“the pleasures of men” relates to what follows—one more piece of evidence tipping the scale in favor of the translation “many concubines.”

Still Pursuing the Wind (2:10–11)

In his pursuit of pleasure, Solomon denies himself nothing. He thoroughly enjoys his task. Indeed, he even considers it his reward—he has earned it (2:10). What better excuse can a man offer for indulging in worldly pleasures? “I earned it. I deserve it because of all I have done. I work hard to be able to enjoy myself for a season.” Pride in his toil drives Solomon to pursue pleasure with gusto.

However, such **pleasure is short lived**. Why? Is the pleasure flawed in and of itself? Yes, but that is not the reason for its failure to last. Solomon examines his “activities” and finds them unprofitable (v. 11). How can pleasure be the reward for works when works themselves do not endure? Products of man’s labor are ephemeral and useless in light of eternity. In every way they are inferior to that which God has created. Wind, flood, fire, and earthquake make a heap of rubble out of man’s accomplishments. Time also takes its toll by its ravages.

True joy cannot originate within man himself. That is the bottom line after all of Solomon’s searching, testing, and consideration. “Under the sun” there exists no lasting happiness or pure pleasure.

Solomon’s Assessment of Life under the Sun (2:12–17)

Solomon now says, “**So I turned to consider**” (2:12). The same verb begins verse 11 (“Thus I considered”). Its sense is something like “I faced the facts” or “turned my full attention to.”⁸ Note that consecutive verses commence with the same word. With these back-to-back phrases Solomon changes the subject. Solomon has completed his pursuit of both pleasure and wisdom and takes stock of the results one after the other.

Although **the second half of verse 12** is somewhat enigmatic, there is no reason to emend the Hebrew text to try to make sense of it. One suggestion translates this portion as follows: “for what kind of person is it who will come after the king, in the matter of what has already been done?”⁹ In other words, how would Solomon’s successors handle the same kind of investigation? Could they do any better than he? Finding this rendering without adequate sense, another commentator suggests that the text refers to Adam as the king of humanity and offers the paraphrase, “Is a human likely to come along who will be better than the king—Adam—whom God made long ago?”¹⁰ Though a clever suggestion, it does not present a material change in the ultimate meaning. As another interpreter points out, the statement “is more a lament than a boast.”¹¹ *In spite of his exhaustive and detailed investigation, Solomon obtains no answers to his questions—even after pursuing wisdom and its opposites, “madness and folly.”*

Due to the extent of his observations, Solomon has no doubts about the relative value of wisdom over folly (v. 13). The two are as different as night is from day, darkness

⁸ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 68.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 293.

¹¹ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 34.

from light. “Excels” means “there is more profit,” the same word the writer uses in 1:3 (“What advantage does man have . . . ?”) and 2:11 (“there was no profit under the sun”). In all his searching Solomon finds something relatively profitable: wisdom. Just as a torch makes walking in darkness much easier and safer, wisdom proves to be a benefit to a person (cf. v. 14). “The wise man is like one who sees, and who can therefore avail himself of many advantages and avoid many inconveniences.”¹²

With all of its advantages, however, **wisdom cannot overcome the ultimate equalizer of sage and fool alike: death** (vv. 14–16). Pursuing wisdom and education produce limited advantages—advantages limited to this life. Wisdom cannot prevent death and does not supercede death. Therefore, an individual is unwise who occupies himself or herself too deeply with it. What could be so bad about dedicating oneself to the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom? “Why then have I been extremely wise?” (v. 15) implies more than just futility; the question implies that there is something better with which Solomon might occupy himself in this life. *It is better for a person to prepare for eternity than to immerse oneself in preparing for this life alone.*

“So I hated life” (v. 17) concludes this section.¹³ As Hengstenberg observes, hating life “is by no means in itself true repentance,” but such feelings are “for the well disposed a powerful motive to return to God.”¹⁴ We should not expect that someone imitating Solomon’s investigations would come to the same dramatic conclusion. After all, Solomon is a believer, not an unbeliever. **The unbeliever holds no means of evaluating the difference between their lost condition and the experience of one who possesses eternal life and divine forgiveness.** Solomon has tasted the glorious wonders of divine grace. God granted him the best of divine wisdom. Once he had basked in the warmth of the divine presence as he prayed. *Solomon knows that there is something more than this life and he is fully aware of how he has lost its joy.*

Solomon can identify with Adam’s feelings in his fall from divine favor and expulsion from Eden. Outside the garden of Eden, Adam must have felt overwhelmed by the stark reality of his loss. What a contrast between God’s blessing and God’s judgment. **For the believer, fellowship with God involves a fullness of joy, peace, and love** (cf. Ps 16:11; Eph 2:4; 3:19; Phil 4:7; 1 Pet 1:8) **that is absent when sin breaks fellowship with God.** The difference is as stark as that between darkness and light. Such a difference drove John to speak of fellowship with God in such terms (1 John 1:3–8).

Like his father David, Solomon learns that the joy of the Lord’s salvation needs restoring (Ps 51:12). For Solomon the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes consist of a confession of what his unrestored condition had been. More than that, however, it was his way to fulfill what his own father had declared would be the result of restoration: “*Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You*” (Ps 51:13).

By explaining his intense disgust with life as he has been living it, Solomon invites his readers to consider his reasons for feeling so strongly. After all, many of them (especially those who are unbelievers with their hands on the reins of power within their

¹² Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1869; repr., Minneapolis: James and Klock Christian Publishing, 1977), 82.

¹³ Note that anaphora (“I hated” begins both vv. 17 and 18; cf. vv. 11 and 12) demonstrates the conclusion of one section (vv. 12–17) and the commencement of another (vv. 18–23).

¹⁴ Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 84.

own political realms) experience the best that this world offers. Privileged people in high positions occasionally contact people living in poverty and ill health, but cannot relate to their lowly condition. Solomon did not rise from the dung heap to sit on the throne of David. He never experienced life in the gutter, the leper colony, or the beggar's shanty. Since Solomon was raised in the palace, how can he properly understand the contrast? To put it simply, Solomon stoops to be a king and the heir of an earthly domain when, in truth, he is a child of the King of kings and an heir of a heavenly domain. His backslidden condition helps highlight the distinction (cp. Luke 15:11–32).

Solomon's Assessment of Labor under the Sun (2:18–23)

Two observations highlight this section: (1) **“under the sun”** occurs repeatedly in a crescendo and (2) **“this also is vanity”** closes each sub-section. “Under the sun” occurs four times in the first 29 verses of the book (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11), but five times in these six verses (2:17, 18, 19, 20, 22). “This too is vanity” concludes verses 18–19, 20–21, 22–23, and 24–26.

Verses 12–17 contrast wisdom and folly, light and darkness, and life and death. An additional contrast between rest and labor arises in verses 18–23. “I hated all the fruit of my labor” in verse 18 is the second half of the anaphora that starts with “I hated life” in verse 17. Irony exists in this declaration since Solomon has already declared, “my heart was pleased because of all my labor” (v. 10).

“I completely despaired” (v. 20) reads literally, “I turned my heart to despair.” Solomon admits to bringing his own heart into a condition of despair. His disillusionment with life is his own creation; he is his happiness's worst enemy. Why does he plunge himself into such despair? For him the future of his kingdom is paramount. Ultimately, he obsesses over his life's work. As far as he can tell, that kingdom will pass into the hands of someone inept (v. 21)—his own son, Rehoboam, who will not appreciate what he receives because he has expended no labor for it.

Selfishness produces Solomon's complaint: “For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?” (v. 22). In the end, Solomon does not fret over the kingdom or its wealth or power—he stresses over his own reputation and self-image. It even leaves him sleepless at night when his weary and exhausted body and mind desires rest (v. 23). *Ecclesiastes records the spiritual journey that took Solomon from sleepless nights to the restful slumber of the righteous.* Psalm 127:1–2 explains this matter more fully in Solomon's own words.

Does your job make you a workaholic? Is it the rapid pace of modern technology? No. It is our own self-centeredness. Like Solomon we rob ourselves of joy and rest. We obtain true joy and rest only when we cast all our cares upon the Lord (1 Pet 5:7).

The Search's Conclusion (2:24–26)

Solomon's conclusion may be summarized simply as **three basic principles:** (1) Man is not good; (2) God is the Giver; and, (3) there is no enjoyment in life apart from God.

Commentators dispute the first of these principles. Some English translations contribute to the controversy with their rendering. In order to properly interpret and

translate the first sentence of **verse 24**, one must compare it with what appears to be the identical sentence in 8:15. In 2:24 the sentence reads literally, “There is no good in man that he eat and drink and his soul see good [an idiom = *get satisfaction*] in its labor” while 8:15 reads literally, “There is no good for man beneath the sun except to eat and to drink and to be happy.”

Context confirms “**There is nothing good in man**” as the correct translation of 2:24. Verse 26 reiterates the concept of sinful man when Solomon contrasts the gifts God gives to good men and sinners. However, we are still left with the problem of how this first clause of verse 24 relates to the next clause, “that he should eat and drink and get satisfaction in his labor.” Leupold translates it as “It is not a good thing inherent in man that he is able to eat and drink and get satisfaction in his toil.”¹⁵ Such a translation does not indicate that mankind is inherently wicked; it merely speaks to the inability of people to enjoy the fruit of their labor. As Leupold says, “What the author seeks to indicate is merely this, that even the simplest forms of enjoyment cannot be made to yield satisfaction by man himself.”¹⁶ Translators and commentators who take verse 24 as a comparative sentence (“nothing better than”) normally assume a corruption of the Hebrew text and then modify the text to fit their assumption.¹⁷

Enjoyment of life is a gift from God. God-given enjoyment does not give approval to hedonism (the pursuit of and devotion to pleasure wherever and whenever one finds it). A great contrast exists between the person who is “good” in God’s sight and the sinner (v. 26). Solomon’s appraisal of the world agrees with John’s: “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. The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts” (1 John 2:16–17). Life in this world can only have significance and provide enjoyment for the believer.¹⁸ Indeed, because the unbeliever cannot reckon with his or her sin and rebellion, life turns out to be a bitter disappointment and its joys empty and fleeting.¹⁹

Questions:

- How can you balance work and recreation to the glory of God?
- What does Scripture say about a person’s work/employment?
- Describe the wisdom that pleases God.
- What distinguishes the death of the wise from the death of the foolish?
- What characterizes a godly attitude toward possessions?
- What are the keys to a good night’s sleep?
- What hinders a person from fully appreciating the good things in life “under the sun”?
- List God’s gifts that 2:24–26 reveal.

¹⁵ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 63.

¹⁸ J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:1146.

¹⁹ Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 80.