

Biblical Soul Care (Lesson 3) Ecclesiastes 2:1-26

Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 The Hebel (Vanity) of self- indulgent pleasure

2 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ 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.

What are some self-indulgent pleasures that could occupy the mind and life of believers in the year 2026?

What are some Scriptures that bring teaching, correction and instruction in regards to pleasure?

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 The Hebel (Vanity) of Materialism

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

What was the Preacher's conclusion in regards to materialism and how should his conclusion shape the believer's life under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 Wisdom: better than folly. The end of the Wise and the Fool

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Should we pursue wisdom as we live life under the sun? What are the benefits of wisdom?

Ecclesiastes 2:18-26 The Preacher laments the realities and limitations of this life under the sun yet closes with some good news!

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? ²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and

his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

How are you doing? Are you enjoying the good gifts God has given you?

Helpful quotes from commentators on Ecclesiastes chapter 2

There is nothing inherently wrong with a good laugh, a glass of wine, or personal achievement. There is nothing wrong with enjoying music or intimacy with one's spouse. But these can never satisfy the heart in and of themselves. The very thing that Qoheleth thought would vaporize "hebel" got vaporized by "hebel". Happiness is a vanishing vapor. All our bubbles burst eventually. The bubbles we think make us happy will indeed burst. We better be sure that we have something more substantial than bubbles. "Don't Waste Your Breath" by Brian Borgman

The expression of hatred for this life is more a mark of piety than a mark of bitterness. If Qoheleth had not felt the deep pain of "hebel", then the curse wouldn't have been a curse. Qoheleth's bubble burst and the joy got sucked right out of his life. He looked at his toil, he looked at his wisdom, he thought he had grasped the reward, and it became hateful to him because in the end, it was simply a breath. Nothing last. In addition, the toil was grievous. Everything is still vapor, and all the efforts and attainments are a great vexation to the spirit because it is still an impossible task. The hunger for more, the hunger for permanence, and the hunger for significance and reward don't just linger. They consume this brief blip on the screen we call life. The hunger is never satisfied. When we think it is, it is satisfying like Chinese food is filling. We just hunger again in half an hour. Qoheleth felt the pain of "hebel" deeply. By Daniel Federicks from Borgman

“For apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment” (2:25). If we live life, eating, drinking, and working, without recognizing that these are God’s gifts to us; if we live life and think these things are rewards to be earned rather than gifts to be enjoyed, then “hebel” will crush us with disappointment. “For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy” (2:26). The one who has received God’s favor, God gives the gift of not only wisdom and knowledge but also enjoyment. The capacity to enjoy the gifts of God is a gift from God. “Don’t Waste Your Breath” Brian Borman

Opportunities to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in one’s work, when they come, are not human achievements but divine gifts, and are to be enjoyed as such. They are only palliatives to be sure, for they to are “hebel”, and will slip from our grip like everything else---but that is no reason to reject them. Brian Borgman

Solomon can identify with Adam’s feelings in his fall from divine favor and expulsion from Eden. Outside of 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 that is absent when sin breaks fellowship with God. The difference is as stark as that between darkness and light. “Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament” by William Barrick

When we accept in a deep way that we are going to die, that reality can stop us expecting too much from all the good things we pursue. We can learn to pursue them for what they are in themselves rather than what we need them to be to make us happy. Death reorients us to our limitations as creatures and helps us see God’s good gifts right in front of us all the time, each and every day of our lives. Instead of using these gifts as means to a greater end of securing ultimate gain in the world, we take the time to live inside the gifts themselves and see the hand of God in them. Ordinarily, we eat and drink simply as fuel to enable us to keep going with our work. Ordinarily, we work not just to earn a living but to find satisfaction and purpose and very likely to make a reputation for ourselves and to achieve success. What if the pleasure of food is a daily joy that we ungratefully overlook? What if our work was never to make us successful but simply to make us faithful and generous? What if it is death that shows us that this is how we are meant to live? “Living Life Backward” by David Gibson

On Finishing Well

Sometime before I entered my eighties, I began to realize that I am now in the final chapter of my life and ministry. I want to finish well. I have been thinking much about what that means and why it is so important. Scripture and church history are full of tragic examples of men who showed great promise but didn’t finish well.

Demas was a fellow laborer with the apostle Paul. He is mentioned in the penultimate verse in Philemon and in Colossians 4:14. He served in an important, strategic, and distinguished role. But in Paul's final inspired epistle the apostle mentions Demas in a different light: "Demas, having loved this present age, has deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:10). Under the threat of persecution and the daily pressure of caring for all the churches (cf. 2 Cor. 11:28), Demas abandoned his calling.

There is a very real danger that someone who has lived and served Christ faithfully for most of his life might grow lazy, careless, fatigued, or lukewarm in the faith—and thus stumble to the finish. We all know of gifted servants of Christ who have fallen into shocking and disqualifying sins, discrediting their testimonies, dishonoring Christ, and destroying their ability to finish well.

And here is one reason this is such a problem: Living the Christian life faithfully is no more trouble-free the older we get. Sanctification doesn't come any more easily with advanced age. The number and intensity of the fiery darts the powers of evil aim at us does not diminish. The obstacles we face don't get easier to overcome. Furthermore, Scripture warns us, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

The apostle Paul, steadfast as he was, was keenly aware of the dangers of falling. He wrote, "Run in such a way that you may win" (1 Cor. 9:24). "I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (vv. 26–27).

I want to follow Paul's example. I want every Christian to aim for that incorruptible crown, to run to win, and to finish well. At the end of our lives, we want to be able to say what Paul said to his son in the faith in 2 Timothy 4:7–8: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day."

Those were practically the apostle's last recorded words. He closed the epistle with some personal remarks, but this was his final statement of triumph: "I have kept the faith." Paul had reached the end of his earthly life, and it was an eternally triumphant conclusion. He was standing on the summit of loyalty to his Lord, and he was bloody but unbowed. There is no higher kind of triumph for any Christian. My prayer for you, dear reader, is that you too will fight the good fight triumphantly—that you will one day finish the course victoriously, and that you will keep the faith with unwavering devotion.

An excerpt from On Finishing Well: The apostle Paul's strategy for a God-blessed ministry and lifelong devotion to Christ by John MacArthur (Grace to You, 2025), 1–2, 4–7.