

Jason Upchurch - Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 - A Theology of Pleasure and Success

This morning we're getting into an interesting section of Ecclesiastes where Solomon talks about pleasure. And he's approaching the discussion from a pagan perspective - from "under the sun" which is a life without God.

He's going to talk about a few things here that are common to our everyday experience. Laughter, wine, building projects, wealth, even sexual intimacy.

What he's giving us is the pagan perspective of all kinds of pleasure and success.

Big Picture: Without Jesus pleasure and success are meaningless. They're vanity.

But here's the problem, as Christians we also fall into this same kind of mentality even though we follow Jesus. We can start thinking that pleasure is useless, laughter is useless, wealth is vain, even intimacy is suspect. And that maybe it's actually more godly to not have success than to have success.

During the 90s and early 2000s there was a large pietistic movement that basically said that wealth is futile and worthless. We should give up all that we have. Poverty is a blessing. And just being honest I think I bought into some of this as well. Guys I admired like John Piper and David Platt and others warned of the excesses of the American dream and how they could take our focus off of Jesus.

And they can. Wealth and success and pleasure can easily corrupt people. There are many warnings about it in Scripture. But what those guys missed was that there are also many other passages that talk about the goodness of success and pleasure if you understand why God has made it and what the purpose is.

And so what we're going to do this morning is tease out something of a theology of success and pleasure from this passage even as we look at Solomon's words about how from a pagan perspective many of these things seem meaningless.

1) Let's look at the Test of Pleasure. **Read 1**

So in typical Ecclesiastes fashion, Solomon says he's going to test the limits of human experience and the world around him. He already showed us in chapter 1 that for unbelievers the cycle of the world is vanity: history is vanity, work and toil are all vanity. None of those things means anything to the pagan.

Wisdom and work are vanity - we saw that last week. Here though we see the issue is pleasure and success. Solomon had incredible resources to have pleasure and so he went all in. The problem was he went all in without God. That's the big issue.

See, when we think about pleasure we need to keep in mind 2 things. First, God gave us the ability to enjoy things.

He created your tongue with the ability to discern 5 different types of tastes - sweet, bitter, sour, all the rest. You can enjoy ice cream and steak and chocolate bars and mashed potatoes and gravy. He didn't have to give those sensations. He could have made our tongues numb.

I remember having Covid a few years back and I couldn't taste anything. It was like eating different textures of flavorless globs. It was terrible. God didn't do that with us.

God created your ears to enjoy sounds. Rumbling of thunder, birds chirping, some of you like classical music for some reason, others of us like the sound of country music and firearms being discharged.

Same thing with sight, smell. The point is that God has given us these abilities and we can enjoy them. It's okay that your toes enjoy the granular feel of sand while your eyes are taking in the waves of the beach.

So God created us with the ability to enjoy and many times in his word commands us to enjoy things.

Secondly, these pleasures aren't absolute. As much as we can enjoy things in this life, the goal of this life is not ultimately our pleasure in the here and now. It's ultimately joy and pleasure forevermore when we're with Jesus.

Our family is reading through Revelation and the saints are martyred because they didn't love their lives to the death. What does that mean? It means they could have avoided death for Jesus had they just denied him. That would save them a lot of pain and slaughter. But momentary pain is better than rejecting Jesus.

Hebrews says of Jesus that he endured the cross, disregarded the shame for the joy set before him. We can endure pain and difficulty in this life because we know there's a greater joy and pleasure on the other side.

Paul says that the sufferings we face in this life are light and momentary afflictions that are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory. Pain and sorrow and grief are the training camp for heaven. Pain is training us now for how to enjoy Jesus for all eternity.

Sort of the flip side of that is that one of the sins we are called to flee as believers is the sin of sensuality. Sensuality is living a life that is dedicated to feeding our senses. It's like gluttony for pleasure and we need to be on guard for that as well. That's basically what Solomon says he's going to do. He's going to live the sensual life and see what comes of that from a pagan perspective.

So Solomon says he's going to test himself.

1) First test is laughter. **Read 2**

The word used here for laughter means general merrymaking. It's frivolity and laughter that's meant for enjoyment. And this gets to the idea that we can enjoy things, but if joy becomes the main thing then it misses the bigger picture. And because unbelievers don't have the larger picture, merrymaking and laughter itself - even though it's good - can turn dark and meaningless.

Think of how much our culture is dedicated to laughter and merrymaking. Some of the most successful TV shows of all time are comedies. Friends, Seinfeld, Cheers, Mash - all amazingly successful. All of them also pushed moral boundaries.

That's always been the case. Every culture and every age has had some type of comedy. Court jesters of old, written comedy. If you can wade through the language some of Shakespeare is pretty funny.

Comedians have long had a place in society. But laughter isn't always good. Sometimes laughter is used to give cover to evil. The comedy of Brian Regan is different than the comedy of George Carlin. Johnny Carson is different than Dave Chapelle.

Laughter is often a cover for sin. I remember going to a John Crist comedy show down in Spokane years ago and in the middle of his routine he made a joke about homosexuality. It was basically a "see homosexuality is not so bad" joke. Which was really odd and there was a lot of nervous laughter. But then it came to light shortly after that that he had been involved in all kinds of sexual immorality while he was on tour. And because what we joke about and find funny is often connected to our lives, I don't think those issues were disconnected.

If you watch comedy movies or shows be careful because laughter is often used as a cover for sin. Or it can be used to make us accept sin.

That's why **Jas 4:9** be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Why is James such a killjoy? Because Christians were laughing about the wrong things. It's not that he's against humor, he's against laughing at pride and sinful pursuits.

Laughter itself can also be empty. **Prov 14:13**: even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief.

Laughter itself doesn't solve the deepest issues of peoples' lives. Think of Robin Williams. Brilliant comedian who took his own life because of the depth of depression. Many comedians are in the same boat - because laughter is often a cover for sorrow or a cover for sin.

What's biblical view of laughter? The Christian view of laughter is that it is a good thing and given by God as blessing.

Prov.17:22 a joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

God can actually use laughter and joyfulness in others to encourage our spirit. It's not the be-all-end-all, but it's an encouragement. It's kind of like an adrenaline shot for your soul.

If you're about to die someone can pump some adrenaline into your body to keep going. You can't live on pure adrenaline, but it can give you a boost to keep going until you've got other things figured out. That's what laughter often is.

There have been difficult seasons in our lives where it's just a long hard slog and so Jodee and I will watch a stand up comedy. Brian Regan or a Dry Bar comedy or a funny movie. Just something so we laugh a little. It's not a long term solution, but sometimes it's just a little pick-me-up to keep going.

Laughter is also a sign of blessing from the Lord.

Job 8:21 Bildad says to Job that God will fill Job's mouth with laughter and his lips with shouting. Now, Bildad gets some things wrong - he accuses Job of sin. But what does get right is that laughter is a blessing from God.

Psalms 126:2 our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations "The Lord has done great things for them."

Christian homes, by and large, should be filled with laughter and joy because we - above all people - have been blessed by God.

A lot of times people want to make a big distinction between joy and happiness in the Christian life. And there is a distinction. Joy is a deep conviction of victory despite difficulty. But there should also be happiness in the Christian life as well.

Prov. 31:25: says of the godly woman: strength and dignity are her clothing; and she laughs at the time to come.

The godly woman - and the godly man for that matter - aren't cowering and filled with fear about the future. We're whining in defeat that the world is somehow got the better of us. That's pagan stuff. No, godliness laughs at the future because we have a God who is sovereign over the future and he supplies us with all the strength and courage we need to do his will with joy.

So joy and laughter are not meaningless. They're not vanity. They are a means which God cheers our hearts to encourage our spirit and they are a sign that we realize that God has blessed us.

2) Second test is wine. **Read 3**

Alright so the next test Solomon tries is wine. And there's some discussion among scholars about what exactly this test is. Some think it's drunken pleasure seeking. But it's probably not that because he says his heart was still guiding him with wisdom. You can't be wise and drunk, so whatever he's doing with wine - or probably strong drink (beer) as well - it's not drunkenness.

As one commentator said, he didn't explore wine as a "[drunken party animal]", but as a connoisseur (Leupold, cited in Longman NICOT on 2:3). That's the idea. He bought expensive wine and likely threw lavish parties around it. And at the end of the day, none of that satisfied him in an ultimate sense.

So there's two aspects here that Solomon seems to be hinting at. He probably sought the physical effects of wine, but also the lavishness of the wine itself was part of the problem.

The lavishness of the wine is sort of the trap of luxury goods. Wine in the OT was a sign of wealth and prosperity. When people make icons of wealth and luxury their goal in life, it always comes up empty.

Maybe it's watches or cars or golf clubs or china sets. It could be all kinds of stuff. I had a friend one time who was looking forward to receiving his inheritance because his parents were very wealthy and he just wanted to go to Vegas and blow a bunch of money. Not get rich, just live the life of a whale even for one weekend.

He wanted to pretend to be rich for a weekend. Utterly meaningless.

So there's the luxury aspect. There's also just the actual effect of wine.

Wine is a good thing because it affects our bodies. Wine cheers the heart, it relaxes the body. Throughout the Bible drunkenness is always a sin - drinking to excess where you lose control of your body. But wine and beer are both seen as a good gift from God for his people to enjoy.

You remember Boaz in the book of Ruth had drank wine after a long day threshing grain and his heart was merry. He's not drunk, he's happy.

The NC is even spoken of where wine flows freely and God's blessings are poured out through the Messiah. It's no coincidence that Jesus's first miracle was turning water into wine.

Wine is good and actually Solomon gets to that. **Read 3a**

He seeks to cheer his body with this wine. I know some of you don't like the taste of wine or beer - that's okay. But it does have affect. And even in moderation that effect, without acknowledging Jesus is meaningless.

Whether it's luxury or relaxation, if you don't have a perspective on the God who gave the wine it's just meaningless.

As Christians we can enjoy these gifts freely because we know the God who gave them.

There's a place in the Law - **Deut. 14** - where God tells the Israelites that once a year they're to take their tithe and go to the Temple and eat it and drink it in front of the Temple. If the Temple is too far to take it, they can just bring cash and buy stuff in Jerusalem. And God is clear, come to Jerusalem and buy whatever you want and eat it in the sight of Temple and thank God for it.

You want steak? Eat steak. You want wine? Drink wine. You want beer? Drink beer? Lamb chops? That's fine too. But eat it or drink it in the sight of the Temple. Why? So you remember who gave it to you.

God's not a killjoy who doesn't want you to enjoy things. He wants you to enjoy things - even wine - but you need to remember who gave it and that's it's purpose has limits.

3) Building Projects **Read 4-6**

Solomon was one of the greatest builders of all time. 1 Kings records many of his amazing buildings and here we see him mention others as well. **Turn to 1 Kings 7:1-12**

This is the lavishness of the king. Mind you he was also building the Temple at the time as well as many other projects. There were no bulldozers, excavators, no backhoes or trains to bring the goods. It was all human labor - slave labor - that built these amazing works. **Read**

All of these descriptions are massive: 11,000sf, 4,000sf and these are just scattered all over the landscape of Israel.

The wisdom of Solomon is rivaled only by the wealth and works of Solomon. The Temple was called Solomon's Temple because it was so magnificent but these other achievements were no less impressive in their own right.

This is why when the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon it says that there was no breath left in her. Between the wealth and wisdom and the buildings, God had truly blessed Solomon beyond measure.

But if you're not building to the glory of God, what does it matter? And that's what Solomon gets to back in **Ecc. 2. Read 11**

We've got a few more things to look at, but the reality is that if you're not building to the glory of God then nothing you do matters. You could have all the vineyards in the world, you could have mansions, you could have vineyards and gardens and manicured forests. But the only thing that matters is that we're building for Jesus.

God has given us the capacity to create and design and build. Those are good things. I think there's a sense in which God has specifically placed in men the desire to build things. That's why little boys like Legos and blocks and build forts all kinds of creations. God has put that in us.

But the things we build are to be built for the glory of God, not ourselves.

Gardens are good, parks are good. Orchards and vineyards are good. You look at some of the most amazing castles and churches in the world and they are far and away the most amazing pieces of architecture. I think the Christian worldview loves beautiful and function things that point to our Creator.

In fact in a lot situations you can tell a person's worldview and religion even just by the design of a building and the materials they use. But buildings are to be made to the glory of God, not for excess or vanity or showboating.

4) Wealth, without Jesus, is meaningless. Read 7-8

This is the accumulated wealth of Solomon. One of the greatest indicators of wealth was how many slaves you owned. Because the master had to provide for his slaves and the family of his slaves, slaves could often be seen as a burden. You needed to have land and crops and means to care for slaves.

Slaves have been common throughout all of history - and the Bible isn't shy about slavery. It was instituted for many reasons, from debtors slavery, to punishments. The Bible condemns man-stealing, taking people and forcing them into slavery - but it's pretty lenient with the institution of slavery in general. Slaves were to be treated well and we also to work hard.

Solomon's wealth is also measured in terms of flocks and herds. **Read**

During the united kingdom of Israel under Saul, David and Solomon, how wealth was measured seemed to change. In ancient times wealth was measured with your animal spread. Job had thousands of camels and goats and sheep. Abraham was wealthy because of the vast number of flocks and herds. Gold and silver were important too, but not usually used as a measure for wealth.

During Solomon's time that began to change. Solomon flaunts his wealth in terms of herds here. He had more than any who came before him. Again, I commend that you read through **1 Kings** to see just the daily food that was prepared for his court. It's huge.

He also acquired gold and silver by the boat load. And he also acquired wives and concubines as well.

Now, there's the obvious problem with sexual immorality and the the fact that these women turned Solomon's heart from the Lord. In the end, it was the foolishness of all of this that led to Solomon's downfall.

But here the issue is that these are a mark of wealth. When we were in Israel we talked to a Bedouin herder who sort of ruled over a tent city and he was talking about how polygamy is common in their culture. But in order to support multiple wives you have to be fairly wealthy. Each wife wants her own house, her own stuff. All the kids are expected to have the same privileges. That's a lot of income required to care for multiple households.

So when it says Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, yes there's an immoral part. But there's a wealth portion he's getting at. None of them had any lack. He was able to afford all of them- it's a wealth flex.

Now, we know the rest of the story. Solomon's wealth and especially his wives drove him away from the Lord.

But we need to be careful with money as well. **Turn to 1 Tim 6. 6-10, 17-19**

Here's the Christian view. Wealth isn't bad. Wealth is simply a tool. But if you desire to be wealthy you'll get yourself into a lot of trouble. If that's your goal - to be rich - there are 7 warnings that Paul gives. **Read 6-10**

That's a lot of warning against not riches, but desiring to be rich. Desiring lots of money.

Now, doing hard work often leads to wealth. Living a life filled with wisdom often leads to wealth. There are a lot of Proverbs that basically say working hard and wise living will make you rich. But the riches aren't the goal. The riches are the side benefit of living a life to the glory of God.

But that money also needs to be focused on God. **Read 17-19**

Let's say you do make a lot of money, you inherit a bunch of wealth, your business goes supernova. What do you do? You use that money to the glory of God. Paul doesn't say sell it all. He doesn't say the money itself is evil.

He says be generous to those in need and thereby store up eternal treasure.

What's Solomon's final verdict on wealth and riches and prosperity?

Apart from God, it's all meaningless. **Read 9-11**

It's easy to look at this and think that all wealth and pleasure and success are bad. That's not his point. His point is that if your life is lived under the sun - a functional pagan who doesn't live to the glory of Jesus - it is all meaningless.

You can have the greatest wealth in the world, the greatest success in the world and be utterly miserable if you don't have Jesus.

And a lot of people -Christians especially - think "Well, I have Jesus I just want that other stuff too!" Again, it's okay to have money and means and pleasure. But they're not the be-all-end-all. It's good and fun, but it's also to be used for the Kingdom of Jesus.

So enjoy, but don't lose perspective.

Pray