

# STUDY NOTES

## "The Futility of Pleasure"

### Summary

In this chapter the Preacher describes the extent of his search for the meaning of life "under the sun." He explored mirth and pleasure, finding them to be vanity. He experimented with wine and folly, while guiding himself with his wisdom. Not withholding anything his eyes desired, he used his great wealth to build and accumulate everything his heart wanted. He certainly enjoyed himself while doing it (1-10).

Yet when the Preacher looked back on all he had done, he found it to be vanity and grasping for the wind. Reflecting upon the comparative value of wisdom and folly, he did find wisdom to excel folly. But he also observed that death came to both the wise and the fool, and both soon forgotten. This prompted him to hate life. Even his accumulated wealth provided little respite, for he must leave it to one who may prove to be a fool. Thus he found such efforts to be grievous, leading one to sorrowful days and restless nights (11-23).

He concludes it is best to eat and drink, enjoying what good there is in one's labor. He realized, however, that the ability to truly enjoy life is a gift from God. He saw that God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to a man who is good in His sight. To the sinner, God might give the ability to gather and collect great wealth, but it eventually winds up in the hands of him who is good before God. Thus much labor without God's blessing is truly vanity and grasping for the wind (24-26).

### I. THE PREACHER'S SEARCH FOR MEANING (2:1-10)

*I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. <sup>2</sup> "Laughter," I said, is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish? <sup>3</sup> I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly-my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. <sup>4</sup> I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem<sup>f</sup> as well-the delights of a man's heart. <sup>9</sup> I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. <sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.*

#### A. A SUMMARY OF HIS SEARCH (1-2)

1. He tested mirth and pleasure, and found them to be vanity
2. He found laughter to be madness, and mirth to accomplish little

#### B. A DESCRIPTION OF HIS SEARCH (3-10)

1. He experimented with wine and folly
  - a. While guiding himself with wisdom

- b. Seeking to find what is good for men to do "under heaven all the days of their lives"
- 2. He made many things
  - a. Houses and vineyards
  - b. Gardens and orchards
  - c. Water pools to water fruit trees
- 3. He acquired whatever he wanted
  - a. Male and female servants, with more born in his house
  - b. Herds and flocks, more than any in Jerusalem before him
  - c. Silver, gold, special treasures of kings and provinces
  - d. Male and female singers, musical instruments of all kinds
- 4. He became great, and seemingly happy
  - a. Greater than all in Jerusalem before him
  - b. Having all his eyes desired, his heart rejoicing in his labor

## ECCLESIASTES 2:1

Solomon conducted his search for life's meaning as an experiment. He first tried pursuing pleasure. He undertook great projects, bought slaves and herds and flocks, amassed wealth, acquired singers, added many concubines to his harem, and became the greatest person in Jerusalem. But none of these gave him satisfaction: ♦But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless. It was like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere♦ (2:11). Some of the pleasures Solomon sought were wrong, and some were worthy; but even the worthy pursuits were futile when he pursued them as an end in themselves. We must look beyond our activities to the reasons we do them and the purpose they fulfill. Is your goal in life to search for meaning or to pursue God, who gives meaning?

## ECCLESIASTES 2:4-6

Solomon had built houses, a Temple, a kingdom, a family (see 1 Kings 3-11). In the course of history, they all would be ruined. In Psalm 127:1, Solomon wrote, "Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is useless. Unless the LORD protects a city, guarding it with sentries will do no good." This book is part of Solomon's testimony as to what happens to a kingdom or family that forgets God. As you examine your projects or goals, what is your starting point, your motivation? Without God as your foundation, all you are living for is meaningless.

## II. THE PREACHER'S REFLECTION UPON HIS SEARCH (2:11-23)

*<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? <sup>13</sup> I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. <sup>15</sup> Then I said to myself, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?♦ I said to myself, ♦This too is meaningless." <sup>16</sup> For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die? <sup>17</sup> So I hated life, because the work that is*

*done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. <sup>18</sup> I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. <sup>20</sup> So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. <sup>22</sup> What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? <sup>23</sup> All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.*

#### **A. REFLECTING UPON HIS LABOR (11)**

1. Looking back on all his works and labor
2. Find them to be vanity, grasping for wind
3. Concluding there was no profit under the sun

#### **B. REFLECTING UPON WISDOM, MADNESS, AND FOLLY (12-17)**

1. He considered the relative value of wisdom, madness, and folly
2. He found that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness
3. Yet the same end (death) befalls the wise and the fool, and both are soon forgotten
4. Prompting him to hate life for its vanity and grasping for the wind

#### **C. REFLECTING UPON HIS WEALTH (18-23)**

1. He came to hate his labor and toil under the sun
  - a. Because he must leave it to one after him
  - b. Not knowing whether those who inherit it will be wise or foolish
2. He came to despair his labor under the sun
  - a. For despite one's wisdom, knowledge and skill, one's heritage must be left to one who has not labored for it
  - b. This he concluded was vanity and a great evil
  - c. In the end, all one had as a result of his labor and the striving of his heart:
    - 1) Sorrowful days, restless nights
    - 2) Grievous works, leading to vanity

### **ECCLESIASTES 2:11**

Solomon summarized his many attempts at finding life's meaning as "chasing the wind." We feel the wind as it passes, but we can't catch hold of it or keep it. In all our accomplishments, even the big ones, our good feelings are only temporary. Security and self-worth are found, not in these accomplishments, but far beyond them in the love of God. Think about what you consider worthwhile in your life—where you place your time, energy, and money. Will you one day look back and decide that these, too, were a "chasing the wind"?

### **ECCLESIASTES 2:16**

Solomon realized that wisdom alone cannot guarantee eternal life. Wisdom, riches, and personal achievement matter very little after death—and everyone must die. We must not build our life on perishable pursuits, but on the solid foundation of God. Then even if everything we have is taken

away, we still will have God, who is all we really need anyway. This is the point of the book of Job (see the introduction to Job).

## ECCLESIASTES 2:16

Is death the ultimate equalizer of all people, no matter what they attained in life? While this appears to be true from an earthly perspective, God makes it clear (as Solomon later points out in 12:14) that what we do here has a great impact upon our eternal reward.

## ECCLESIASTES 2:18-23

Solomon continues to show that hard work bears no lasting fruit for those who work solely to earn money and gain possessions. Not only will everything be left behind at death, but it may be left to those who have done nothing to earn it. In addition, it may not be well cared for, and all that was gained may be lost. In fact, Solomon's son, who inherited his throne, was often foolish—see 1 Kings 12. Hard work done with proper motives (caring for your family, serving God) is not wrong. We must work to survive, and, more important, we are responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of those under our care. But the fruit of hard work done to glorify only ourselves will be passed on to those who may later lose or spoil it all. Such toil often leads to grief, while serving God leads to everlasting joy. Do you know the real reason you are working so hard?

### **III. THE PREACHER'S CONCLUSION FROM HIS SEARCH (24-26)**

<sup>24</sup> *A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.*

*This too, I see, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*

<sup>26</sup> *To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he*

*gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This*

*too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

#### **A. MAN SHOULD ENJOY THE GOOD IN HIS LABOR (24a)**

1. There is nothing better
2. Than to eat, drink, and to enjoy good in one's labor

#### **B. THE ABILITY TO ENJOY IS A GIFT FROM GOD (24b-26)**

1. He saw that this was a gift from God
2. For no one can truly enjoy life without God (NIV, NASB)
  - a. To those good in His sight, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy
  - b. To the sinner, God gives the work of gathering and collecting
    - 1) To give to the one who is good before God
    - 2) For the sinner, his work becomes vanity and grasping for the wind

## ECCLESIASTES 2:24-26

Is Solomon recommending we make life a big, irresponsible party? No, he is encouraging us to take pleasure in what we're doing now and to enjoy life because it comes from God's hand. True enjoyment in life comes only as we follow God's guidelines for living. Without him, satisfaction is a lost search. Those who really know how to enjoy life are the ones who take life each day as a gift

from God, thanking him for it and serving him in it. Those without God will have no relief from toil and no direction to guide them through life's complications.