



LESSON 2 | THE EXPERIMENT (1:12–2:26)

Recall from Lesson 1 that the basic goal of Ecclesiastes is to target all of the ways that we try to build meaning and purpose in our lives apart from God, and then the Teacher deconstructs them. The Teacher thinks we spend most of our time investing energy and emotion in things that ultimately have no lasting meaning or significance, and he gives us a hard lesson in reality.

We can spend our whole life working and achieving because we think it makes life meaningful, but the Teacher says we would be wise to stop and consider the march of time. For all of the human effort that takes place in the world, nothing really ever changes. Sure, we develop technology and we build nations that rise and fall, but go climb a mountain and see if it cares. It was there long before us, and it will be here long after us. No one is going to remember us or anything we did centuries from now, but that mountain will still be there and the sun will still rise and set.¹ “Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher...Everything is meaningless.”

With this idea in hand, the Teacher goes on to examine all the activities and false hopes in which we invest our lives to find meaning and significance, like wealth, career, social status, or pleasure. Countless people believe the advertisements that promise happiness through buying and consuming products. Bigger is better: bigger cars, bigger houses, and of course bigger paychecks. But do these things really lead to greater joy? Others think pleasure will make life worth it for them. “Go for it,” the Teacher says. Indulge your senses. Make life a party. Live for vacations. Work for the weekend. It only lasts for a moment, and Monday always comes.

Speaking of work, do you think working hard is going to make life worth it? The Teacher suggests we think about the stress and the toll that it takes on us — all the anxiety and the sleepless nights. And by the time we actually earn some wealth we might be too old to enjoy anyway. And then by the time we have to pass it on to someone, they may neither care about what we did to earn it, nor use it wisely themselves.

In our text today we see how the Teacher experimented with all of these things in his search for meaning. And in despair, he summarizes all his pursuits as meaningless, “chasing after the wind.” Ultimately, he concludes, we can do nothing better than eat, drink, and find satisfaction in our work. But even this is not of our own; rather, it is a gift of God (2:24-25).

Maybe this is why Ecclesiastes is in the Bible, to show us that satisfaction and meaning come from God alone. Everything “under the sun” (i.e. apart from God) will never satisfy or be enough. Ecclesiastes doesn’t show us this to make us discouraged or depressed, but to drive us back to God. Our unsatisfied longings are a spiritual clue that we were made to enjoy the pleasures and gifts of God.

¹ The Bible Project, “Overview: Ecclesiastes.” The “experiment” sections on the following pages are excerpted from Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (702-709).

Experiment #1: The Pursuit of Wisdom (1:12-18)

As one who applied his heart to searching out wisdom, the Teacher sets out to give his assessment. In searching out the wisdom “under the heavens” (1:13) and the things done “under the sun” (1:14), even from the perspective of a king, it is all “meaningless and chasing after the wind” (1:14).

There is no way to fix all that is broken, and no way to count all that is lacking (1:15). With this proverb, the Teacher acknowledges that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world “under the sun.” He concludes that with the greatest wisdom and knowledge comes frustration and grief (1:18). Wisdom brings with it much frustration because the world does not seem to make sense, and it increases grief because one becomes more aware of the pain and suffering in this world (a topic that the Teacher will elaborate on later).

Experiment #2: The Pursuit of Pleasure (2:1-11)

Having failed to find meaning in searching out by wisdom all that is done, the Teacher decides, secondly, to find ultimate meaning and satisfaction in the pursuit of pleasure. We should understand that in Ecclesiastes “pleasure” is not evil. In fact, in 2:26 the Teacher calls it a gift of God. Later he encourages his readers, “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do” (9:7). **The pursuit of pleasure itself is not wrong. The problem is that the Teacher seeks to find meaning in pleasure “under the sun.”**

The Teacher experienced everything he could in an effort to find meaning and satisfaction in life. He explores different forms of pleasure, some of it sensual (laughter, alcohol and women) and some it from achievements and possessions. He built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens and parks, planted orchards, and set up irrigation systems (2:4-6). In addition to these accomplishments, the Teacher had great possession: slaves, herds, flocks, silver, gold, treasures, singers, and concubines (2:7-8).

This king exceeded all who ever came before him, and had all his eyes could see, but looking at his achievements, he saw it all as meaningless, “there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11). In other words, he sought pleasure apart from God, without taking God into account. Pleasure does not satisfy and it does not provide meaning in life.

Experiment #3: Is Wisdom Better Than Folly? (2:12-17)

The Teacher struck out first with wisdom and now also with pleasure. So he devises a third test. He will investigate whether the use of wisdom offers benefits over the use of folly. Immediately the Teacher discerns a major difference between a wise person and a fool: “The wise have eyes in their heads; while the fool walks in the darkness” (2:13). Darkness here is a metaphor for spiritual blindness. The fool is like a blind man who stumbles as he walks (Proverbs 3:23; 4:18-19); the wise man, on the other hand, has eyes in his head: he can see, and is therefore able to avoid disaster.

However, the Teacher ultimately concludes that even wisdom cannot provide meaning in light of death. Both the wise and fools die. Death, in his view, is the end. If the wise as well as fools end up dead, there is no gain in being wise. At the end of life, even the wise have nothing to show for having lived wisely. They also die and will soon be forgotten. So in the long run, what good is wisdom and being wise? Again, the Teacher’s conclusion will require that we look beyond his “under the sun” reasoning if we are to find true meaning.

Experiment #4: Is There Meaning In Our Work & What We Leave Behind? (2:18-23)

Having failed to find some "gain" in life in using wisdom, in pursuing pleasure, and in looking for the benefits of wisdom over folly, the Teacher conducts a final test. There is something left when we die, right? Our possessions do not die with us. Those who die leave an inheritance behind. Could this give meaning to a lifetime of work? Certainly today people work hard with the idea that their efforts will justify their existence.

The Teacher quickly closes this door (see 2:18-21). Once you are dead, the fruits of your labor will go to someone who did not work for it, and that someone may be a fool! So again he raises the question: "What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?" (2:22). The answer is, "Nothing!" – even for a person possessed by a restless ambition to achieve something – whatever it may be – and for people who put their work before everything else. The gain is less than nothing because, as the Teacher observes: "All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest."

CONCLUSIONS (2:24-26) & CONNECTIONS TO JESUS²

What then? The Teacher has failed with four experiments. He found no meaning in seeking to understand life by wisdom, no lasting value in pursuing pleasure, no advantage in being wise in contrast to being a fool, and no lasting benefit from gathering possessions. All of these endeavors are futile and empty. So what's the point? Is there no benefit at all to living on this earth? Yes, there is.

The Teacher concludes, "***A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their own toil***" (2:24). This is not an entirely new thought. When he was investigating pleasure he made an interesting discovery. As he built houses and planted vineyards, he writes in 2:10, "My heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil." Even though he describes his work as "meaningless" it did carry an unexpected side benefit. He received pleasure from all his work.

When God created human beings, God put them in a garden with the mandate "to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Work would give people a sense of accomplishment and pleasure. Now the Teacher discovered that even though all his work was futile, it still did carry with it this sense of pleasure.

And so, coming to the end of his experiments and finding no lasting meaning in life "under the sun" – life apart from God – he advises us to at least experience the pleasure of the present moment: eat and drink and find enjoyment in your work. Don't look for enjoyment in the future but find enjoyment in your everyday activities. For after advising us to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our work, he continues: "*This [enjoyment] also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*"

Enjoyment is God's gift to us. Pursue it on your own for yourself ("under the sun"), and it will vanish like the wind - as the Teacher discovered (2:1-2). Instead, we are to receive enjoyment as God's gift to us, as the Teacher concludes in 2:26, "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."

² Excerpted from Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (31-34)

Those who please God are those who acknowledge God – those who receive enjoyment from their work as a gift from God; those who honor God by being grateful for God's gifts. To those who please God, God showers his good gifts: not only joy, but also wisdom and knowledge.

"The sinner" in verse 26 is literally "the one who misses the mark." In the Teacher's vocabulary, the word describes someone who, though not wicked, has missed the point of the life that God has given.

In this context "the sinner" is the person who seeks the goal of life in himself and the goods he can acquire "under the sun." To such a person God gives "the work of gathering and storing up." There is no end. This is a true workaholic. Their whole life is focused on gathering and acquiring for themselves. But what is the result? Instead of ending up with riches, God gives it to the one who pleases God.

The Teacher's message, then, is that since all of our worldly endeavors apart from God are meaningless, we ought to find enjoyment in the gifts God gives us every day. We ought to savor the moment and find enjoyment in our present eating, drinking, and work because these are God's gifts to us.

Unfortunately, however, many people postpone enjoyment to a time in the future. Many people today hate their work. Instead of thanking God for their work, they say, "Thank God, it's Friday!" People look forward to retirement; that's when they will begin to enjoy life. But retirement may never come! Even Christians often complain about "living in this fallen world" and look forward to the future joy of heaven. **But the Teacher, like much of Scripture, calls us to find joy in this life here and now.** "There is nothing better ... than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in ... [your] toil."

Reading The Teacher Through The Lens of the New Testament

The New Testament continues the same emphasis. To be sure, the New Testament also knows of life beyond death, and a future new heaven and earth where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev 21:4). **But Jesus also teaches us to savor God's gifts in the here and now.**

The Teacher's message is to find enjoyment in God's daily gifts of eating, drinking, work, and Jesus provides meaning to this message. Jesus teaches us to pray to our Father in heaven, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). Our daily bread is God's gift to us. Jesus also tells us, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...." (see Matt 6:25-33). Our heavenly Father will give us whatever we *need*. So we can be content and daily enjoy his gifts.

And we should remember that when Jesus comes to this earth, he also works - first as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), then as a teacher, which brought with it the work of healing, mentoring, feeding people, and more. **Through Jesus, moreover, our work has been redeemed and can again provide meaning, joy, and even gain.** Paul tells us that "our work in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). He also encourages us to work in gratitude for God's gifts: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly....**And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything thing in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him**" (Col 3:16-17).

Elsewhere Paul writes, "**Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God**" (1 Cor 10:31). "Whatever you do" includes our eating and drinking and work. We can thank God every day for his wonderful gifts. And we can enjoy God's gifts every day.

DISCUSSION

1. What is your motivation for getting up each morning? How often do you think about it? How does this motivation provide meaning to your day?
2. Think of people you know and spend time with (friends, family, coworkers, etc) — what do their lives reveal about what they think will make them happy?
 - ➡ People keep themselves busy with all sorts of things in life. How often do you think the average person stops to ask themselves where it's all going and what it all means?
3. In 1:18 the Teacher says, “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.” What do you think the Teacher means by this? In what ways is wisdom a kind of “mixed blessing”?
4. After reading all the things the Teacher experienced in 2:3-9, can you think of any modern-day equivalents of this kind of life?
 - ➡ Can you think of a time where you felt you had gained what you set out for, only to find in time that you were dissatisfied again? What were some reasons for this? What did you do?
5. The Teacher, at the end of chapter 2, says that “a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his own toil” (2:24).
 - ➡ What is your reaction to the Teacher’s conclusion? How have you learned/experienced this in your own life, and what does that look like?
 - ➡ Do the teacher’s observations about work fit with your own experience? How have you found meaning in your work?
 - ➡ How does Jesus provide meaning to what the Teacher is observing here?
6. Satisfaction, joy, and contentment are ultimately gifts from God. How would you describe “true joy” to a friend who knows nothing of this?