

chasing the wind

The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

Chapter 2

Enjoying Life, Enjoying Work

PRIMERS

Some people work hard their whole life only to die suddenly with little chance to enjoy success or retirement. How fair is that?

How often do we get so taken up in chasing a dream that we leave God out of the chase?

What difference does God make in our everyday pursuits of pleasure and work?

1. WHAT'S GOING ON IN CHAPTER 2?

Solomon shares his quest for meaning in life, that is, what fills life full of satisfaction. He recalls how he moved from one “test” to another, seeking what makes a significant difference and lasts. Vs. 3b holds the key to the chapter and in many ways to the book: *“I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.”*

2. CHAPTER 2 NOTES

- Vss. 1-10: Solomon puts several aspects of life to the test with an eye on the lasting significance of each as the true meaning of life. Each of these pursuits says, “Vote for me! I’ll show you life’s meaning!”
 - i. Vss. 1-2: Pleasure
 - ii. Vs. 2: Laughter
 - iii. Vs. 3: Wine
 - iv. Vs. 3: Folly – his wisdom serving as a corrective here
 - v. Vs. 4: Construction of houses [1 Kings 6:38; 7:1-12]
 - vi. Vss. 4-5: Planting of vineyards [SS 8:11], gardens [SS 4:12; 5:1; 6:2, 11], parks (Hebrew, *pardesim* – Paradise), and orchards
 - vii. Vs. 6: Development of water pools to irrigate the trees
 - viii. Vs. 7: Purchase and use of servants
 - ix. Vs. 7: Ownership of vast herds and flocks (1 Kings 4:22-23)
 - x. Vs. 8: Amassing of a silver and gold for payment [1 Kings 10:14-17]
 - xi. Vs. 8: Men and women singers
 - xii. Vs. 8: A harem (1 Kings 11:3)
 - xiii. Vs. 9: A great reputation [1 Kings 10:23]
 - xiv. Vs. 20: Unrestrained pursuits
 - xv. Vs. 10: Work and immediate delight in work
 - xvi. Vs. 10: Wisdom as a companion all along the way
- Vs. 11: The verdict on all the above – apart from God – was “meaningless, a chasing after wind, nothing was gained under the sun.” In other words, none carried lasting value or significance beyond its immediate pleasure.

- The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 and Jesus' words in Matthew 6:32-33 speak to a lasting God-centered meaning for life.
- Vss. 12-17: Solomon next considered wisdom, that is, secular wisdom apart from God, from the same perspective – does it have lasting significance? His quest will now introduce death as a leveler of both wise and foolish.
 - Vss. 13-14: He first acknowledged that secular wisdom is better than folly.
 - Vss. 14-16: He then saw that, wise or foolish, death takes both and leaves both forgotten. Death is the great eraser.
 - Vs. 17: For Solomon, death became very personal, leading him to hate his life and his achievements as futile, empty, purposeless. See 9:1ff. Solomon here reached the depths of despair, reminiscent of Job (Job 3) and Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14-18).
 - Compare 1:14 and 2:17 and you catch how the hole Solomon was digging got deeper and deeper. When he confronts his own immortality, death takes hold of his spirit and strangles life.
 - The Egyptian pyramids testify to death as a shaping force in life. The outcome there was the construction of incredible memorials believed to open a way to heaven for kings. The outcome here was Solomon's despair.
- Vss. 18-23: Solomon's eye now turned to look back on all the work he had put into his life. The root words for toil and work are found 9 times in vss. 18-23. Seeing death at the end of all that work, Solomon was left in despair.
 - Vss. 18-19: His despair deepens as he considers leaving the results of his sweat and skill to the next generation. What's worse he cannot know if his successor to Israel's throne (Rehoboam) will be wise or foolish. It's hard enough to say, "You can't take it with you." It's worse to think about a real jerk inheriting it all.
 - Vs. 21: The use of three strong words, "wisdom...knowledge...skill" serve not only to show the complete investment of Solomon in his work but also to deepen his frustrated despair. It's as if he's saying, "When I consider how much of myself I invested in it all and then leave it to someone who did nothing!"
 - Vs. 22-23: What's the price for worldly success according to Solomon? Pain, grief, stress, frustration, and sleepless nights. We spend our resources, and for what? Only to be swindled in the end by death. Our "memorials" of work and wisdom, once inscribed with our name, end up erased by death and newly inscribed with the name of someone else! Now that's "meaningless!"
- Vs. 24-25: This is a key verse in understanding the chapter, offering an alternative look at all our work and wisdom. A better translation than NIV drops the words "better than" (not in the Hebrew) and reads, "*A man can do nothing on his own to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This, too, is from the hand of God.*" The "aha!" here for Solomon? Life with all its pleasures, work, and immanent death only has meaning when we see God in control. God determines our lot in life. His decisions are final. Until we get this, we can never truly enjoy life as we live it. (See 1 Timothy 6:17.)
- Vs. 26: The person who lives for God, who "pleases" God, knows lasting "wisdom, knowledge, and happiness." Others are doomed to frustration and despair, cracking their heads against what seems to be a meaningless wall of rigidity and mystery. On pleasing God, see John 8:29; Romans 12:1; and 1 Thess. 4:1.
- Note the end of vs. 26: This truth still leaves us with unanswered questions.
- This is the first of seven appearances in Ecclesiastes of Qoheleth's alternative perspective on life, one that comes repeatedly back to God. Those seven are here (2:24-26) and 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-10; and 12:1. 6.

UNDER THE SUN TRUTHS

1. Pleasures, work, wisdom and achievements lack lasting meaning part from God.
2. God's purpose and plan for our lives can lead us to contentment, joy, and plenty of mystery.
3. Christians find their greatest pleasure in pleasing God.