

Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is relevant this morning because everyone in this room wants to be happy. It's what has driven all human activity, throughout all human history. Even the person who commits suicide does so because they want to be happy, or at least, for the pain to end. And that's what this chapter is about: how to be happy. In it, we see the details of the most exhaustive search for happiness that anyone has ever conducted. So let's pray together that God will point us to the source of all joy this morning.

Father, by your Spirit, please would you reveal yourself to us through your Word now. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

What is the most dangerous phrase in the English language? Which words, would you say, have caused humanity the most pain, the most suffering?

My suggestion is the phrase “if only”. Thoughts of what might have been, **if only** things had been different, **if only** I’d said this, **if only** I’d done that, **if only** I were different in some way, **if only** I had this, **if only** I didn’t have that, I’d be happy.

If only I were more successful. **If only** I were more attractive. **If only** I were married. Or perhaps, if you’re married, **if only** I were single. If only I could just eat that fruit, the one God told me not to eat, then I'd be happy. “If only” is heavy enough to crush a human spirit. “If only” is toxic enough to poison a human mind. “If only” is strong enough to break a human body.

Not so long ago, on Twitter, the hashtag `mylifewouldbecompleteif` started trending. Here’s some of what people were saying on Twitter. I went on there so you don’t have to.

My life would be complete **if** I never had to worry about money.

My life would be complete **if** I could eat all day and never get fat.

My life would be complete **if** my hair and makeup magically did itself every morning.

My life would be complete **if** I could accomplish each & every goal I'm working towards.

My life would be complete **if** there was no more bullying.

My life would be complete **if** my painful memories came with a delete button.

Then there were lots of Tweets about life being complete **if only** they could marry Justin Bieber or Rihanna.

"If only" reveals where we're placing our hope. In a sense, **If only** reveals our true Saviour. Sex, marriage, career, money, health, success, approval, status, power, relationships, comfort, family, children, beauty, all of them promise to deliver satisfaction.

Let me ask you, What is your "if only"? Where are you pinning your hopes for satisfaction? One way you answer that is to ask yourself, what do I daydream about having? What do I have nightmares about losing?

And what we find, of course, if we get our "if only", is that there's another "if only" beyond it. Lasting satisfaction is a mist, a mirage, an itch we can't quite scratch, a phantom limb.

And yet we still we get back on the treadmill don't we? We assume that the problem will go away if we just get a different if only. Or perhaps more of our particular if only. If only we could have unlimited resources, then we imagine we'd be satisfied.

That's why God has given us Ecclesiastes chapter 2. Because it's the story of King Solomon's search for satisfaction. And he really did have unlimited resources.

Here was a man who could never say, "**if only** I just had this one more thing", because he already had it. And in chapter 2, he shares with us his conclusions about the search for satisfaction.

So three headings as we look at chapter 2:

1. The Search for Satisfaction in Pleasure (vv1-11). I'll spend most time on this.

2. More briefly. The Search for Satisfaction in Wisdom (vv12-16).

3. Again, more briefly. The Search for Satisfaction in Work (vv17-24)

Firstly, then, the search for satisfaction in pleasure (vv1-11).

Look with me at chapter 2 verse 1:
“I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” So Solomon’s saying to himself, “Let’s see if worldly pleasure can really bring lasting satisfaction.”

And he gives us the short answer in verse 1:
“this also was vanity.”

Now that word translated “vanity” appears 30 odd times in Ecclesiastes. In Hebrew, it literally means “vapour”. Like your breath on a frosty morning, you see it, but only for a second. It’s impossible to hang on to. Pleasure is like that, according to the man who had everything.

But we don't really believe that, do we? If we DID believe worldly pleasure was like a vapour, we wouldn't give our lives to chasing after it would we?

So then Solomon reels off this dizzying list, vv3-10, of all the pleasures he pursued in the search for satisfaction.

Here's the first one. **v3** "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". We think to ourselves **if only** life was one long party, then I'd be satisfied. **v3** Solomon has been there and done it.

v4. "I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself." I'd be satisfied **if only** I had a nicer home. More property. Holiday villas. Beautiful architecture. Land. Penthouses. Mansions.

I'd be satisfied if only I could have my own apartment, and I wasn't sharing. If only I owned a house rather than just renting. If only I wasn't still living with my parents. Then I'd be satisfied. Solomon's already ahead of us.

And he's not messing about here. Solomon oversaw the building of **God's** house, the temple. It took seven years and 153,000 workers to finish. And then he took 13 years to get his own palace just the way he wanted it. Imagine if you had 13 years and an unlimited budget, what would you build? Solomon lived that dream.

v5 "I made myself gardens and parks..." I'd be satisfied **if only** I had wide open spaces filled with beautiful plants and trees and fountains, a place I could go to escape, be alone, an oasis where there was nothing but the whispering of wind in the treetops. No traffic, no litter, no noisy neighbours.

Then I'd be satisfied. Solomon's ahead of us. v5. "I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees."

Gardens are very significant in the Bible, of course. This sounds like an attempt by Solomon to return to the paradise of Eden. Maybe you can relate to that desire. If only things were the way they used to be. Before things all got messed up. And we think to ourselves, **if only** I could get back to THAT place, then I'd be satisfied.

v7 If only I had more time to myself, more leisure time. If only I didn't have to work. Then I'd be happy. If only I had more time to do what I want to do. If only I had slaves to do my bidding. v7 Solomon is already ahead of us. "I bought male and female slaves, and

had slaves who were born in my house." He never had to lift a finger if he didn't want to.

v7 continued. OK, but I'd be satisfied **if only** I had more possessions. A nicer car, a faster computer, a bigger TV, that new iPhone they've just announced. **v7** Solomon's already ahead of us. He says, "I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem." In other words, I owned more stuff than anyone ever had.

v8. If only I had more money, I'd be satisfied. Wouldn't it be great to be rich? Never to have to worry about your outgoings. You could always afford whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted.

Solomon's already ahead of us. **v8** " I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces." Just from the taxes he collected, Solomon got 25 TONS of

gold every year. And that doesn't even include all the revenue from land, investments, treasure that was brought in from around the world on his fleet of ships, and from the kings and queens that visited and gave him incredibly expensive gifts. He was absolutely LOADED. And of course, with all that gold comes a feeling of material safety, security. If only I could have that, I'd be satisfied.

v8 "I acquired male and female singers..." Music and the Arts. If only I could be surrounded by my favourite entertainment, all the time. I don't just mean being able to own all your favourite Mumford and Sons records, I mean actually owning Mumford and Sons. Not just Mumford. But also his Sons. You get his whole family. In your massive house. By your massive swimming pool. Playing exclusively for you, every night. That's what Solomon had.

By the way, I take research very seriously. I used the internet to find out exactly what Mumford and Sons would cost. They said you can hire them for an evening for about \$50,000. I said, No, I mean actually keeping them. Still waiting for a reply on that one.

But that's what Solomon had: v8 "I got singers, both men and women."

End of v8. Sex. If only I could sleep with whoever I wanted, whenever I wanted, then I'd be satisfied. Solomon's way ahead of us. v8 I had "many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.."

Pop quiz for you. Do you remember how many wives Solomon had? 700. And how many girlfriends or concubines? 300 girlfriends. Every time he has a date night at Applebees, he has to charter an entire fleet of minivans.

In all seriousness, what this means is that every sexual desire he has is immediately gratified, by some of the most beautiful women on the planet.

Some men are addicted to this particular “if only”. **If only** I could sleep with *anyone*, any time, then I’d be satisfied. I think that is the promise of pornography. It’s a fake, pixellated, 2D attempt to have Solomon’s harem in our own home. That’s what it is. And when it doesn’t satisfy, we think, yeah, but if they were real women, then I’d be satisfied. And of course, it’s not just an issue for men.

Well Solomon tried it. He had it. For real. And we’ll get his verdict in a minute.

v9 “I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me..” **If only** I were more powerful, more respected and admired and feared. I wouldn’t **have** a boss, I would be the boss.

Solomon’s already ahead of us. He was so great that when the Queen of Sheba, who was no slouch herself, comes to visit in 1 Kings chapter 10, it says that when she saw all that Solomon had accomplished, “she had no more breath in her.” She was literally breathless, he was that rich and powerful.

And then. Finally. **In v10**, Solomon sums up his search for satisfaction in pleasure.

v10: “whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure.”

And Solomon's a realist. He says, there *is* some delight to be taken in these things, if only briefly.

v10 "my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil."

But. You knew it was coming, and there it is in verse 11.

This is the moment of truth for all of our "**if onlys**". Because Solomon is way ahead of us. He had no more "if onlys" left. He'd gratified them all. And this is where it leaves him. This is where you and I would end up if our wildest dreams suddenly became reality. He's gone there so we don't have to.

v11 "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."

In other words, all this pleasure - all of it - is a vapour. Like steam from a kettle, it just dissipates. It leaves us with nothing.

It just does not last.

Well OK, we say, so it doesn't last. Big deal. What's wrong with just getting more of it? Arranging the fleeting pleasures end to end like dominoes so that life becomes a constant pleasure?

But of course, it doesn't work that way. We are the richest, best educated, most pleasure-seeking culture in human history, we have more free time than any other civilisation in history, and we are more bored and depressed and medicated than we've ever been.

We know from our OWN experiments, let alone Solomon's, the more we get of worldly pleasure, the less it satisfies. Like addicts, endlessly trying to recapture that first high, increasing the dosage again and again, and becoming more and more enslaved to it.

The Hollywood actor Jim Carrey put it like this, "I hope everybody could get rich and famous and have everything they ever dreamed of, so they will know that it's **not** the answer."

And the question is, do you believe that? Or are you still on the treadmill of "**if only**"?

If Solomon, the man who had everything, could return from his research with the verdict that worldly pleasure does not satisfy, what hope do **we** have of finding satisfaction there?

But what about searching for satisfaction in wisdom? That's our second heading, (vv12-16), very briefly this time.

v13 "I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. " So it's better to be wise than a fool. But ultimately, v14, "the same event happens to all of them."

v15 "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?"

So you see what he's saying. If everyone dies anyway, and everyone is forgotten, from the Oxford Don in his lofty spire, to a homeless man, ranting incoherently on the street, what difference does wisdom make? Ultimately, none. Because both end up in the same place.

v16 "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."

The question is, do you believe that? Or do you stay on the treadmill, thinking that **if only** you could be cleverer than everyone else, wiser, sharper, wittier, better educated, better read, you'd be satisfied? If a king whose very NAME has become SYNONYMOUS with wisdom says that his wisdom was made meaningless by death, what hope do **you** have in finding lasting satisfaction there?

Then finally, the search for satisfaction in work. vv17-24.

A few years back, there was an interview with Thom Yorke, the frontman of Radiohead. Millions of records sold, worshiped by fans, adored by critics. I think he would approve of Ecclesiastes. Seriously. Their albums are very much like Ecclesiastes, kind of depressing at first, but ultimately rewarding.

Anyway, in this interview, Thom Yorke was asked about his extraordinary body of work, and he said: "I thought when I got to where I wanted to be, everything would be different. I'd be somewhere else. I thought it'd be all white fluffy clouds. And then I got there. And I'm still here."

The interviewer said: "[So] what's the point of carrying on [working]?"

He said, "It's filling the hole...that's all anyone does."

The interviewer asked, "What happens to the hole?"

There was a long pause, and then he answered: "It's still there."

Or to use Solomon's words in **v17** "I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, *for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*"

The man who has everything knows that success in work and career does not ultimately satisfy.

It's also meaningless because of verse 18: “because I must leave it to the man who will come after me”. You can't take it with you. It gets left to the next generation, they get the benefit of all your hard work, and verse 19, who knows what they'll do with it. If death always takes away from us all that we work for, then v22, what's the point of all that sweating and toiling?

The theologian Derek Kidner puts it like this: “If every card in our hand will be trumped, what does it matter how we play?”

But then. Finally. In the last three verses, Solomon shines a glimmer of hope in our search for satisfaction.

v24. “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”

In other words, Solomon is saying, stop living in the “**what if**”. Whatever satisfaction you receive from pleasure, or wisdom, or work, understand its limitations. Understand that it doesn’t last, and it’s not meant to. Enjoy it for what it is: a temporal blessing - verse 24 - given by the hand of our loving Maker.

One of the things that spoils our pleasures is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give.

They weren’t designed to bring you ultimate satisfaction. They were designed to point towards someone who can.

The disillusionment we feel when our pleasures fade is not an accident. It’s been designed to drive us toward the only source of all lasting pleasure.

See, it doesn't matter how much stuff we have. It doesn't matter how much cash, or sex, or property, or holidays. Because none of that addresses the root of our dissatisfaction, which is our broken relationship with the source of all satisfaction.

Look at **verse 25**: "apart from HIM who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

If our search for satisfaction ignores God, we're like the thirsty man tearing around trying to catch raindrops on his tongue, when there's a beautiful river flowing right at our feet. Without God, even the rich man in his palace is miserable. It's why so many lottery winners say they wish they'd never won. But with God, even the poor man in prison can sing for joy.

Solomon was a wise man of course, but there is one who is even wiser, greater, and more powerful.

Listen to the way Jesus speaks about himself in Luke chapter 11. He says: “The queen of Sheba... came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, *something greater than Solomon is here.*”

King Solomon couldn't offer satisfaction. But King Jesus does.

He did it by removing the barrier that exists between ourselves and the source of all joy, all pleasure, all happiness: namely God.

The barrier exists because you and I seek satisfaction everywhere except in Him. Maybe even as I was speaking of these different “if onlys”, you could still feel their pull.

That's because instinctively, we look to created *things*, rather than the Creator, for our satisfaction. We treat *them* as our gods, rather than God himself. We would rather stay on the treadmill of "if only", rather than come to the Author of all satisfaction.

We rightly deserve God's punishment for despising him in that way.

But God the Father sends God the Son, a better King than Solomon, to take our punishment in our place so that all those who come to him in repentance and faith could have endless joy, endless satisfaction.

If you have not yet come to Jesus, what is keeping you? In your search for satisfaction, why would you try everything - anything - except Christ? And if you *are* a follower of Christ, why do you go on chasing after earthly satisfaction, as if Solomon hadn't already told you that it doesn't work?

Verse 26, God alone is the one who gives “wisdom and knowledge and joy” which LASTS. We look for happiness in all the places we’ve been talking about, and as CS Lewis says, that’s because “we’re far too easily pleased.”

We search feverishly for crumbs while Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

We look for a sputtering candle while Jesus says “I am the light of the world”.

We look for something to distract us from death, or some way of keeping it off as long as possible, while Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

We desperately search for direction in life, while Jesus says, “I am the way.”

We drink a thimble full of brackish water while Jesus says, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will *never* thirst. The water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to *eternal* life.”

Get off the treadmill. Put down the thimble. Come to him.

Let’s take a few moments to speak with God now, in the silence. We’ll put some words up on the screen, but feel free to use your own.