

Pleasure Amidst the Vapor

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 2:1-26 | Pastor Brett Toney | October 5, 2025

Much To Do About Nothing?

There is no doubt that we live in a most physical world. Pews and pulpits, bratwurst and bicycles, seasonal changes and vacations to mountain ranges. What do we do with all this stuff? One author observes that there are two common Christian responses: the pietistic and the escapist.¹ The pietistic minimizes any inherent goodness in the stuff, enduring this world and just holding on for the next. None of the stuff of this world really matters; “the condition of our soul is all that matters.” The escapist response wants to cover the brutal realities of this world with platitudes. Let’s just be positive and uplifting, always encouraging. “God doesn’t make ugly. Just believe ... Don’t fret yourself with such questions.” It will all work out. The stuff of this world helps distract. “Oh, that sounds hard. How about some more pie?”

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon leverages his unique position and wisdom to warn you not to look to the pleasures of life to deliver you from the vapor that is all of life. It is asking the stuff of this world to write a check that it cannot cash. Looking to find pleasure in this life in all that you trouble yourself with won’t gain you anything; such a pursuit cannot deliver you through the vapor. Yet Solomon doesn’t take either the pietistic nor escapist response. He doesn’t get rid of every worldly pleasure to retreat to the hills, nor does he give pat answers to gloss over what is grievous in this world under the sun. Rather, he leads us to deepen and expand our awareness of God’s presence in all things—a God-centeredness even in the pleasures of life that will pass away. Here he highlights that Pleasure is a poor god and that wisdom and pleasure do not redeem or relieve. So, the path forward to finding joy in the vapor of life is to receive God’s gift for what it is.

Pleasure is a Poor God (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

Amid the fleeting perplexities of life, Solomon intends to see what he can make of life by evaluating pleasure. Is pleasure the purpose of life? Note, though, how he goes about this. He says in v.3 and v.9 that he pursues pleasure according to wisdom. Wisdom guided him; it remained with him. So, he does not go after all manner of unhinged debauchery. He is being methodical in his pursuit of pleasure. And he tried everything: laughter, alcohol, building projects, vineyards, royal gardens, orchards, pools, slaves, possessions, wealth, entertainment, sex, fame, power. All is catalogued in v.1-10. It is as though Solomon exercises dominion in his role as the wisest king to try, by any means possible, to reconstruct Eden. Can he re-create the pleasure of work in the garden, being naked and unashamed? Is pleasure the key to return to the Garden and get out from under the sun? As you read an account of his life in Kings and Chronicles, you see how these verses line up with what we read there. Solomon was uniquely suited for this endeavor. What is there that could be kept from him? We're frustrated by our pursuits of pleasure because of limited resources and abilities. Not so Solomon.

But just like the innumerable rock stars, actors, athletes, super stars, and rulers after him, none of it could satisfy. His conclusion in v.11 of this pursuit is, "all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was [vapor] and a [shepherding of the] wind." It profited nothing. Can you ever get high *enough*? Does the alcohol make the pain go away *forever*? Just one more video, then you'll be satisfied. Just one more promotion, one more vacation, one more night with her, one more accolade, one more acquisition. You and I have tried these very same things. Don't lie to yourself. It doesn't work. It never satisfies. Pleasure, in whatever form it takes, is a poor god. It makes promises it cannot keep.

Wisdom Doesn't Redeem (Ecclesiastes 2:12-16)

Why doesn't it work? Why doesn't the prudent pursuit of pleasure redeem or relieve life in the vapor? Is the problem with wisdom or with pleasure? Solomon first evaluates wisdom in v.12-16. What more could a successor do? Solomon has left no stone unturned. He recognizes the intrinsic value of wisdom over folly; just like walking in the light is better than in darkness, v.13. However, wisdom doesn't redeem. The same end comes to the wise as to the fool. The wise dies and is forgotten just like the fool. What's the point then of being wise? What profit is there in deftly navigating between good and evil, right and wrong? Wisdom doesn't—*can't*—deliver humanity or the creation out from under futility. No matter how refined your wisdom is, you cannot lay hold of the vapor of life and wrestle it into submission. Solomon devoted his life to the application of wisdom. And he arrived at the point where he was finally at the end of himself. It failed him. It wasn't enough. A whole life: gone. For what? V.16, death was coming to him just the same.

Pleasure Doesn't Relieve (Ecclesiastes 2:17-23)

Wisdom failed. How about pleasure? Look at v.17-23. In this lament and despair over his toil, I'm suggesting he is evaluating pleasure, evaluating his pursuits in v.1-11. The often repeated reference to "toil" is not just to a professional vocation, his job. It is to all that he troubled himself with. In v.10, he references all his hedonistic pursuits as his "toil." Cheering his body with wine was his "toil." Gathering entertainers was his "toil." All his sexual exploits was his "toil." And what did this pleasure-seeking toil profit him? V.20 is the epicenter of the paragraph, "I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun." All that he tried could not satisfy.

And this is driven home in this paragraph bracketed by parallels. V.17 and 23 start and end his deduction: the toil of pleasure does not satisfy. It leads only to grief and vexation. No rest

was given to the weary in pleasure. V.17, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me.” The center point of his identity and pride was shown to be shambles. All that he had set his hand to was for what? All he had troubled himself with—what did he profit? Then you have the parallels in v.18 and 22—all that you trouble yourself with, you can’t take it with you. Are the dishes ever done? Are the savings ever enough? You’re going to die, so what does it matter if the kitchen is pristine or a robust nest egg is stored away? Augustine observed that if something doesn’t last forever or can be taken away, it is not a worthy source of happiness.² Solomon concluded the same. The third parallel is between v.19 and 21—so maybe you leave that kitchen, those savings to one who comes after you. All that you labored at and troubled over, it may be a fool who inherits it without any appreciation for your efforts.

This life, these decades—what despair! Think of all the years worth of time you fret over so many things that you think are so important. Wise things. Pleasing things. Worthwhile things. All the diapers you change, all the meetings you attend, all the meals you cook, all the reports you file, all the assignments you complete, all the deals you close, all the books you read, all the patients you help. One day you will die. You can’t take any of it with you. Your legacy will be forgotten. Such is life under the sun. It is vapor—shepherding the wind.

So, Receive God’s Gift (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Are we left to sit in vexation with a restless heart? Are we to stop trying to find meaning in the world and just fast and pray? “Here, take this uplifting verse like two Advil. You’ll feel better in the morning”—is that the solution? I think Solomon instead concludes this chapter with a glimmer of light in the fog. Verse 24 isn’t the motto of nihilism, “Eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Enjoy it while it lasts—it doesn’t matter anyway.” No, I think wise Solomon guides us truly. “Eat! Drink! Find enjoyment!” The way to live in this world with all of its stuff is with a

God-centeredness even in the pleasures of life that will pass away. “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil,” or more directly, “cause his soul to see good in his trouble.” Will you direct your soul to see good in the vapor? The only way to do so is by a saturated God-centeredness. “This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,” says the Preacher! Your food is from God. Your drink is from God. Your trouble and toil in all that you set your hand to is from God. Your ability to see the good in such simple, daily, physical stuff is from God.

Stop playing around with drink and sex and power and work and wealth as though you have them by your own will. “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Corinthians 4:7) It is all from the hand of God, a gracious gift from the Maker. You will soon go the way of all the earth and be forgotten. V.25, “Apart from [God] who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”—no one! The “pleasure” Solomon tested his heart with to see if it was any use in v.1-2 is the same pleasure—the same word—that God gives to the person who is pleasing to him in v.26. What do you do with all this stuff? You don’t look to it for pleasure as a way to deliver you from the vapor. Rather, you receive it as what it is, a gift of God to those who trust in him for you to enjoy in this life under the sun.

One author wrote that, “[Discipling] really is just a bunch of church members taking responsibility to prepare one another for glory.”³ If we are going to be a church like that, that prepares one another for glory, we need help navigating this world with its stuff. The ability of the human heart to take a good thing and make it a god is unmatched. That pleasurable thing you devote yourself to—entirely done laundry, job performance goals, wholesome farm-to-table homemade meals, a beautifully manicured lawn. Has it become unduly enlarged in your value of it? How would you know? One indicator is what happens when it is taken away. How do you

respond? Like James 4:2, “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel”? A second indicator is gratitude. 1 Timothy 4:4-5, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” Do you receive all—all food, all drink, all work, all holy sex, all projects, all prosperity—do you receive all with gratitude to God?

These are questions to ask in preparing one another for glory. We don’t let any good gift get *in the way* of glory. But you receive the gift from God to prepare you better *for* glory. Such pleasing things though can lead you to forget the God who gave them. A glass of wine, a job well done, a cultivated apple tree—don’t put the expectation on such gifts to deliver you through the vapor. Rather, receive them with gratitude to deepen your desire for more—not just more gifts but more of the Giver. If God is so kind to give such good gifts under the sun, what more does he have in store for you when you are in his presence? Since he has given his Son, will he not freely give all?

Yet we are left in this chapter on a sobering note at the end of v.26. Not all are beneficiaries of God’s grace and gifts. He contrasts “the one who pleases [God]” with “the sinner.” Yes, all of us are sinners. But he concludes here with the one who refuses to repent and believe God’s promises—promises that have now all been fulfilled in Jesus. The sinner is given only to a life of vapor and shepherding the wind. Always grasping in this world to find something of the next, yet never laying hold on it. Having but never receiving. Walking around under the sun in darkness. Have you tried all manner of pleasure to find purpose and significance in this life? If it hasn’t come up short yet, it will. You’re trying to shepherd the wind instead of

humbling yourself before your Maker. Don't look to the pleasures of life to deliver you from the vapor. Only the True Shepherd can.

¹Dr. Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (P&R, 2014), 102.

²Augustine, *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol.1, “The Happy Life” (trans. Ludwig Schopp), CIMA Publishing (New York: 1948), p.58-59.

³Mark Dever, *Discipling* (Crossway, 2016), 43.