



Ecclesiastes - Chapter Two

I Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26 - First Catalogue of vanities (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

Solomon conducted his search for life's meaning as an experiment. The first thing he tried to satisfy himself with was pleasure. He bought more slaves, herds, and flocks. He surrounded himself with jesters, singers, and many beautiful women. This still did not satisfy him. He referred to it as 'chasing after wind'. A person can feel it when it passes but they cannot grasp it or keep hold of it. Solomon believed that he and everyone else must not base themselves on the pursuit of happiness, but on the solid foundation of God. He said this because human accomplishments, wealth, and materials mean nothing after death.

I.c Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 - The Futility of Self-Indulgence

The Teacher turns to examine the significance of less 'intellectual' pursuits.

¹ I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?'

Ecclesiastes 2:1-2

I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' The previous section saw Solomon look for the meaning of life in wisdom - wisdom as it can be understood apart from eternity. He found no meaning in skilful, wise living under the sun. Now he continued his search for meaning, and tested a life of pleasure and amusement.

Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself. Solomon tested life's meaning in mirth and pleasure. He tested the theory many live under today; that the meaning of life is found in more and varied pleasures, entertainments, and excitements.

The Hebrew word for pleasure used here is *simkhah* and can mean either 'joy' or 'mirth,' and the reference to laughter indicates that the latter is what the Teacher has in mind. This is confirmed in: <<*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth*>> (Ecclesiastes 7:4), where mirth renders the related Hebrew noun *simkhah*. A light-hearted approach to life is foolish, in view of the tragic realities of a fallen world.

But again, this also was vanity. The Teacher will shortly explain how he came to this conclusion; but he states the result of the testing at the beginning.

I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' Solomon tested the life lived for laughter, pleasure, and fun, yet he knew that: <<*Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief*>> (Proverbs 14:13). Like a modern celebrity he ran from party to party, entertainment to entertainment. At the end of it all, he judged it to be 'Madness' and without accomplishment.

Adam Clarke on laughter and mirth: "He tells the former to her face that she is mad; but as to the latter, he thinks her so much beneath his notice, that he only points at her, and instantly turns his back."

³ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine – my mind still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

Ecclesiastes 2:3

I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine, and how to lay hold on folly. The Teacher lived a life satiated with the pleasures of wine and light, frivolous amusements. He wanted to see what was good for mortals to do if this life was all there was: <<*I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13).

My mind still guiding me with wisdom. The Teacher did not indulge himself so excessively with wine that he lost his ability to think with genuine discernment. On his attempt to lay hold on folly, refer to the comment made on Ecclesiastes 1:17.

⁴ I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself;

⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of

fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

Ecclesiastes 2:4-8

I made great works. The Teacher looked not only for meaning in amusements, but also in great and legitimate accomplishments. He tried to give life meaning through the satisfaction that comes through building, organising and improving one's environment: <<*At the end of twenty years, during which Solomon had built the house of the LORD and his own house, Solomon rebuilt the cities that Hiram had given to him, and settled the people of Israel in them. Solomon went to Hamath-zobah, and captured it. He built Tadmor in the wilderness and all the storage towns that he built in Hamath. He also built Upper Beth-horon and Lower Beth-horon, fortified cities, with walls, gates, and bars, and Baalath, as well as all Solomon's storage towns, and all the towns for his chariots, the towns for his cavalry, and whatever Solomon desired to build, in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in all the land of his dominion*>> (2 Chronicles 8:1-6). Derek Kidner commented, "As if he had over-reacted in turning to futile pleasures, he now gives himself to the joys of creativity."

I made myself gardens and parks, I bought male and female slaves, I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings: <<*They went to Ophir, and imported from there four hundred and twenty talents of gold, which they delivered to King Solomon*>> (1 Kings 9:28), and: <<*The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as numerous as the sycamores of the Shephelah*>> (1 Kings 10:27). If building, improving, and amassing great riches and accomplishments could give true meaning to life, the Teacher would have found it.

Adam Clarke on the treasure of kings and of the provinces: "1. The taxes levied off his subjects. 2. The tribute given by the neighbouring potentates. Both these make the 'peculiar treasure of kings;' taxes and tribute."

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. ¹⁰ Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. ¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil

I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:9-11

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Solomon's accomplishments rightly lifted him to prominence, and he had whatever meaning fame could bring to life: <<*The LORD highly exalted Solomon in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel*>> (1 Chronicles 29:25), and: <<*When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, (fame due to the name of the LORD), she came to test him with hard questions*>> (1 Kings 10:1).

Also my wisdom remained with me. In all of this Solomon did not lose his wisdom or ability to genuinely assess meaning and fulfilment - at least in an 'under the sun' sense.

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure. This is even more significant coming from Solomon, who had the resources to grant whatever his eyes desired, and every pleasure of his heart.

For my heart found pleasure in all my toil. The Teacher comes to the unpleasant realisation that his work resulted in no permanent gain under the sun; nevertheless, he did receive a reward in return for his work, namely, the pleasure which the work itself gave him. It might be said that the Teacher lived this period as a hedonist, but as an intelligent one. He looked for legitimate pleasures in life, such as the rightful pleasure one takes in the accomplishments of hard work.

Then I considered all that my hands had done, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. Solomon examined his life lived for pleasure - even legitimate pleasures - and saw that it too was meaningless. All was vanity. There was no enduring, eternal sense of meaning to life lived for these earthly pleasures and accomplishments.

I.d Ecclesiastes 2:12-26 - Wisdom and Joy Given to One Who Pleases God

Solomon the Teacher is pondering the meaning and purpose of life. He is asking and attempting to answer the question "is life really worth living". In the opening chapters the Teacher examined the monotony of life (Ecclesiastes 1:4-11); the vanity of wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18); and the futility of wealth (vv.1-11 above). Now the Teacher considers the certainty of death (vv.12-23).

I.d.i Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 - More on the Vanity of Wisdom

Although he knows wisdom is better than folly, the Teacher still finds 'vanity' in his practice of it.

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.

Ecclesiastes 2:12

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. The Teacher continued to search after meaning and life, and followed the lines of wisdom and madness and folly further, unto their ending point. Refer again to the comment made on Ecclesiastes 1:17.

For what can the one do who comes after the king? Solomon here spoke of himself as the son of David; yet he also spoke of his own successor, who turned out to be Rehoboam; refer to 1 Kings 11:43. Of both, Solomon understood that the new king can do only what he has already done. Even for a king, there is nothing new under the sun.

The Teacher's reign as king surpassed all others and thus anyone who comes after the king will at best only be able to copy what has already been done. Having determined that even his own impressive reign was vanity (vv.1-11), Solomon turns again to examine the value of wisdom; refer again to Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 and the associated comments.

¹³ Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

Ecclesiastes 2:13

Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. There is more gain in wisdom than in folly. Despite the fact that wisdom is a mixed blessing: <<*For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow*>> (Ecclesiastes 1:18) with distressing limitations (e.g. vv.14-16), it is incomparably superior to a life of foolishness.

¹⁴ The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said to myself, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity.

¹⁶ For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools?

Ecclesiastes 2:14-16

The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. The Teacher saw the meaninglessness of even wise living, pleasure, and accomplishment in a life lived under the sun - apart from the knowledge that eternity is real and God matters. Wisdom, although infinitely better than folly, does not grant immortality to those who possess it: the same fate (i.e. death) happens to both the wise and the foolish: <<*For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:19), and: <<*All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead*>> (Ecclesiastes 9:1-3). To make matters still worse, even the wise are typically forgotten after their death and receive no enduring remembrance by others.

No matter how wise a person is or is not; how much they do or do not accomplish; or how much pleasure they have or do not have, the same event happens to them all: they all die. Given the Teacher's premise - that eternity and God do not matter - this is the only possible conclusion. Kidner observed, "Everything may tell us that wisdom is not on a par with folly, not goodness with evil; but no matter: if death is the end of the road, the contention that there is nothing to choose between them will get the last word."

What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise? If death ends it all, then this life is robbed of true meaning. Even the good and great accomplishments of this world are unbelievably temporary, and therefore ultimately meaningless. The wise man dies just as the fool. Truly, the Teacher looked at this and said, "This also is vanity."

¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:17

So I hated life. The limitations of wisdom mentioned in vv.14-16 lead the Teacher to say that he hated life. The fact that he elsewhere states that life is superior to death: <<*But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is*

better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost>> (Ecclesiastes 9:4-5), and commends its enjoyment, for example: *<<I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13), and: *<<Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun*>> (Ecclesiastes 9:9), indicates that this statement is not to be interpreted as a capitulation to utter despair. Rather, his use of 'hate' in this instance is to be understood as the common rhetorical technique of stating a relative contrast in absolute terms. This can be seen by the use of 'hate' in: *<<So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren*>> (Genesis 29:30-31 ESV), *<<If a man have two wives, one beloved and another hated, and they have borne him children, both the beloved and the hated, and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated, then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, who is indeed the firstborn*>> (Deuteronomy 21:15 KJ21), and: *<<Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple*>> (Luke 14:26), where hate means to love something less than something else. The Teacher 'hates' life in the sense that he finds it deeply disappointing in certain key respects; life has lost much of its sweetness for him.

Kidner noted, "If there is a lie at the centre of existence, and nonsense at the end of it, who has the heart to make anything of it?" And again, "He has no illusions, though by rights it is we who should have none - we who have heard from the secularists themselves that our very planet is dying."

Adam Clarke says that life is more literally lives. "The lives, both of the wise, the madman, and the fool. Also all the stages of life, the child, the man, and the sage. There was nothing in it worth pursuing, no period worth re-living and no hope that if this were possible I could again be more successful."

I.d.ii [Ecclesiastes 2:18-26 - The Vanity of Labour](#)

Considering the fruits of all his toil also leads the Teacher to declare it 'vanity.'

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹ – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰ So I

turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun,²¹ because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

I hated all my toil. While at times he found pleasure in his toil, e.g. v.10 and v.24, Solomon's enjoyment is severely diminished by the knowledge that he must eventually hand over his life's work to someone else: <<***Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather***>> (Psalm 39:6), and: <<***When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others***>> (Psalm 49:10), and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Not only did Solomon hate life under this thinking (v.17), he also hated his very accomplishments, saying of them, "This also is vanity."

Solomon's belief that he might leave all his accomplishments and material wealth to a fool seemed to trouble him deeply. This concern was well founded, because after Solomon's death, his son and heir Rehoboam turned out to be a fool in many ways; refer to 1 Kings Chapter 12 and 1 Kings 14:21-31. Clarke observed, "Alas! Solomon, the wisest of all men, made the worst use of his wisdom, had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and yet left but one son behind him, to possess his estates and his throne, and that one was the silliest of fools!"

As the master of all that the Teacher has acquired and achieved, his successor has the potential to squander everything. This painful realisation causes the Teacher to despair that his life's work will, in the grand scheme of things, amount to anything significant: <<***What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?***>> (Ecclesiastes 1:3).

Sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. Under his premise, death haunted Solomon. Not in the sense that he seemed afraid to die, but he despaired of how death (if that ends existence) makes all meaningless.

For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. If death robs a person's work of meaning, then life is indeed sorrowful, work is burdensome, and there is no rest or relief from the despair of a meaningless life: <<***And to the man he said, 'Because you have***>>

listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life>> (Genesis 3:17), and: <<Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like labourers who look for their wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me>> (Job 7:2-3). Surely, this also is vanity. Actually, it is worse than vanity. The Teacher also observed that in an 'under the sun' world, this is a great evil.

The Teacher hints at a vital question: why does this bother humankind so? If this is indeed man's lot and always has been; if every thought of an eternal meaning to life is a wish and a fantasy, then why does that idea cause discontent in almost everyone? Man may wish he could fly like a bird, but there is little sense of meaninglessness in the heart of a man or woman because they cannot fly like a bird. This is because humankind was not designed to fly like a bird; but they are designed for eternity. Kidner explained, "Incidentally, this bitter reaction is a witness to our ability to stand clear of our condition and to weigh it up. To be outraged at what is universal and unavoidable suggests something of a divine discontentment, and hint of what the great saying in 3:11 will call 'eternity' in man's mind."

²⁴ There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink. This thought is prominent in Ecclesiastes, being repeated some five times. It seems that the Teacher advised his readers how to make the best of a bad situation: <<***If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'***>> (1 Corinthians 15:32). If life really is as despairing and meaningless as he has shown it to be, then people should simply accept that true meaning is impossible to find, and simply find contentment in moderate and responsible pleasures. This thinking is prominent in today. Few people live for true, eternal meaning in their life; so they live with 'under the sun' rules. They try to work hard, to enjoy life, to have fun, to be nice, to not get caught doing wrong, and they try not to hurt anybody. This thinking may work in making a bad situation better; but it gives no true meaning to life in light of eternity.

If one has no certainty of making a lasting impact on the world through the results of one's work (v.11 and vv.18-23), the best that one can hope for is to find enjoyment in their toil and in God's simple gifts of food and drink. Such enjoyment is to be viewed as a gift from the hand of God, granted to the one who pleases God, rather than to the sinner.

Again this shows that the Teacher is no atheist; he certainly believes in God. However, the God of the Teacher is not the God who matters and gives meaning to life as it is connected to eternity. The God of the Teacher simply teaches people to make the best of a bad situation.

This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. The Teacher knew that his seeming redistribution from God's hand was not enough to give true meaning to life lived under the sun.