

## 4.

## II. PLEASURE IS VANITY

### Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

#### A. *[The pleasures I enjoyed] (2:1-10)*

1. *I said to myself, "Come now, I will try entertainment. Look at good [times]" (2:1-2),*
  - a. *But behold this also was vanity (2:1b).*
  - b. *Of laughter I said, "It is craziness!" (2:2a),*
  - c. *And of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" (2:2b)*
2. *I searched in my mind how to pull it out with wine (2:3),*
  - a. *Controlling my body and my mind with intelligence and to keep a hold on folly (2:3b)*
  - b. *Until I might see what [is] good for the sons of men to do under heaven [during] the number of the days of their lives (2:3c).*
3. *I enlarged my works (2:4-6)*
  - a. *I built for myself houses (2:4b).*
  - b. *I planted for myself vineyards (4:4c).*
  - c. *I made for myself gardens and parks, and I planted in them trees and all fruit trees (2:5).*
  - d. *I made for myself pools of water to irrigate [my] orchard and the sprouting of trees (2:6).*
  - e. *I bought male slaves and female slaves and sons of the house (2:7).*
  - f. *Also for me were livestock: cattle and flocks in abundance (2:7b).*
  - g. *More were for me than all who had been before me in Jerusalem (2:7c).*
4. *Also I gathered for myself silver and gold and treasure of kings and the provinces (2:8a).*
5. *I got for myself men singers and women singers and delights of the sons of men (breast and breasts) (2:8b).*
6. *I became great and exceeded all who were before me in Jerusalem, yet my good sense remained in me (2:9-10)*
  - a. *So all that my eyes desired, I did not withhold from them (2:10a)*
  - b. *[Or] my heart from any pleasure (2:10b-10d)*
    - (1) *Because my heart rejoiced in all my labor (2:10c)*
    - (2) *And this was my reward for all my labor (2:10d)*

#### B. *Then I turned to all the works that my hands had done and to the toil at which I had toiled to do it (2:11),*

1. *And behold I was vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:11b),*
2. *And no profit [in it anywhere] under the sun (2:11c).*

After becoming disillusioned with the value of investigating life and work all over the world, Solomon decided to try an opposite approach. He chose to concentrate on pleasing himself instead of learning from others. True to Solomon's approach to life, he went all out with his new strategy. He conducted a drive to experience pleasure, in other words, to try out everything he thought could make him happy. Surely that way life would be satisfying and productive. He specifically mentioned five areas he investigated in his search for pleasure and then said he tried out everything else his heart took an interest in.

**Verses 1-2. Entertainment.** The first source of pleasure Solomon explored was entertainment. People called entertainment "having a good time," so surely he could find meaning and value in it. He began to seek pleasure in humor, laughter, comedians, jokers, and clowns, which were customary events and personnel in great kingly courts of that day. For a brief time, Solomon must have received a big sense of merriment from all the jolly stunts that were performed for him. However, when he wrote Ecclesiastes, he was extremely clear that the merriment did not please him for long.

Solomon had seen too much in his father that revealed actions that produced real and lasting value. Soon he must have missed the serious, business-like activities he had observed in his father. It did not take him long to become ashamed of the silliness of which he had become a part. When the laughter was over and reality set in, he told himself the way he had been acting was crazy. He realized it was accomplishing nothing. So he quickly recognized that shallow laughter and entertainment were deceptive and temporary. It was all vanity.

**Verse 3. *Wine.*** Just because entertainment did not satisfy him, Solomon did not give up his search for value in pleasure. He decided to turn to another highly-vaunted means of experiencing excitement and exhilaration, so wine was the second area he investigated. People were always saying how good wine made them feel and how it helped them forget their worries and have a good time. So he experimented with wine to pull him up from discouragement and help him be positive and cheerful.

Solomon was specific in saying he was aware that wine could also make people lose control of their good senses and cause them to act foolishly. He determined he would not let that happen. He determined to keep control of his body by being intelligent in his use of it. For the same reason, he was determined “to keep a hold on folly,” that is to keep folly under control so it would not take control of him. That way he felt he could learn how to use wine for the good it could do. By that means, he would be able to learn how people everywhere under heaven could receive good results from wine throughout the days of their lives.

Solomon did not take time to reveal at that point the conclusions he reached about wine as a source of pleasure, but he quickly dropped the subject and turned to another avenue for gaining pleasure. At the end of his discussion on pleasure, he surely included wine in his declaration that the whole pursuit of pleasure was “vanity, grabbing at the wind” (v. 11).

Solomon may not have wanted to elaborate on what stupid actions wine may have caused him to

do. At any rate, he soon learned what everyone who depends on wine for pleasure learns in the end. The values of wine as a means of obtaining fun and pleasure are illusory, deceptive, and temporary. Soon, wine is a mocker, and in the end it produces pain, loss, waste, uselessness, and addiction. It does not give pleasure. It robs a person of pleasure and real contentment.

**Verses 4-10. *Possessions.*** After being disillusioned with the benefits of wine, Solomon turned to still another venue as a source for pleasure. The third area he examined was collecting great possessions. The world was so full of attractive and interesting objects that he felt owning as many of them as possible would surely give him contentment.

Solomon began his drive to gather great possessions by building about him pleasant and beautiful surroundings. He included houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, orchards, ponds for irrigation of his trees and shrubs, and slaves to protect, clean, and repair all of his possessions and also to tend to his every need. Soon his appetite for ownership reached out even farther than his immediate surroundings and included livestock of cattle, sheep, and goats. He began to include possessions that were not so much for him to see as just for him to know that he owned them. His drive for possessions became insatiable. He said he pursued his quest so aggressively that he came to possess more than all who were before him in Jerusalem.

Solomon waited until the end of his discussion of the value of pleasure to give his appraisal of the value of great possessions. He stated his conclusion in verse 11, but first he hastened on to mention other avenues he explored in his search for pleasure.

**Verse 8a. *Wealth.*** When Solomon had gained more possessions than he could take care of, he still did not have contentment; so he turned in a fourth direction and began to seek for pleasure in great wealth. He could not find anything else to buy, so he decided to just store up money and wealth in case he ever needed anything else. He gathered silver and gold and all other treasures that kings delighted to collect. Then he added even more and

increased his wealth by owning or controlling whole provinces in his nation. His land holdings probably became more valuable than all the wealth he stored in his treasury.

All that wealth did not hold Solomon's attention for long. It certainly did not provide much pleasure. He couldn't even see it because it was all locked up to protect it, so he hastened on to explore still another source of pleasure.

**Verse 8b. *Music and dancing.*** Solomon's fifth project was gathering musicians and dancers. He hired or commanded the performance of the best male and female singers in the land and listened to their latest productions. However, just singing was not enough. Soon he added the best dancers in the land to perform as the singers sang.

Translators and interpreters have had a hard time with the last words of verse 8. They have translated them in a variety of ways, and some interpreters simply say their meaning is uncertain. The words are not vague or even rare. To their genuine credit, the good gentlemen probably are embarrassed to express the words as they are written. "*Delights of the sons of men (breast and breasts)*" is not at all puzzling to men of lesser integrity. Solomon included topless dancing among the activities he explored in his search for contentment in pleasure.

**Verses 9-10. *Anything else my heart desired.*** Solomon gave assurance that, if he omitted any pleasurable object or action from his list, it was not because he did not try it. He clearly said he tried out everything he took an interest in. If he felt an urge or inclination to experiment with any new activity or adventure, he sought it out and experienced it.

It is interesting that before making that assertion, he paused to say that, even though he was more powerful and achieved greater accomplishments than anyone before him in Jerusalem, he did not let his many experiences take away his good judgment. He said, ". . . *yet my good sense remained in me.*" By that statement, Solomon revealed that he was aware that many men had lost their fortunes, self-control, self-respect,

reputations, and good character in their pursuit of pleasure and "having a good time." He was careful not to let that happen to him. He did not become so excessive that he lost his dignity or his commitment to duty. No doubt, he meant that at least in his judgment he kept his search for pleasure under control and did not let it control him. In other words, he considered that he enjoyed all his pleasures in moderation.

Solomon's viewpoint was that first and foremost he found pleasure in his work and performed it faithfully. He called his responsibilities "labor," but he insisted he enjoyed them. He did not do physical labor, but he declared that the work he did was difficult, tedious, and tiring. His labor was ruling a nation, administering a government, conducting foreign diplomacy, controlling crime, dispensing justice, and protecting millions of subjects. It was indeed hard labor, but he enjoyed it. He liked what he was doing. He considered that the pleasures he sought after were his reward for doing a good job in his labors as king of Israel. However cautious he may have been in keeping his search for pleasure within reasonable bounds, he still asserted he did not deny himself any of them.

**Verse 11. *All of it was vanity.*** Solomon spent a lot of words elaborating on all the avenues he explored in his search for pleasure. However, when he had finished his search, it did not take him many words to express his conclusion. He said all of it was "*vanity, grabbing at the wind.*" Finding true satisfaction in all those sources of pleasure was as impossible as trying to catch the wind. His expression was highly descriptive. He meant a person can know the wind is real. He can feel it. He can see its effects. But just let him try to catch hold of it, put it in a box, or store it up for later. He can't do it. Solomon learned that finding satisfaction in personal pleasure is just as impossible as capturing a handful of air.

Solomon did not elaborate on why all his possessions and pleasurable activities disappointed him. He just declared he did not get any real satisfaction or lasting benefit from any of them. He did not need to try to give a long explanation. He just shared his testimony that they did not turn out to be what he expected. They did not give him what

he was seeking. His search was long and involved, but it was a disappointment.

Every other person who has ever given over his life to the pursuit of pleasure has experienced the same end result. It takes some people a long time to admit the truth, and some destroy themselves before they face reality. But the last page of every story is always the same. Living for fun and pleasure is not what it claims to be. It does not produce anything of value, and it does not even produce contentment. It is all a sham. It gives excitement for a few moments, but then it is gone forever. You can't get it back, because it will never have the same effect again.

Multitudes are still being deceived by the false promises of entertainment and "good times." They badly need to hear and heed the words of Solomon before they hurt themselves further. Today Solomon's warning needs to be published far and wide, and believers in the Word should devote themselves to being the publishers. Solomon's warnings have the power to deliver men from the mad disappointing chase after pleasure. Perhaps nothing can help people more with their need to discover that pleasure is a deceiver than Solomon's inspired words that pleasure is "***vanity, grabbing at the wind.***" Solomon's words should not be kept shut up in a bound book. It is time for God's people to proclaim them to the world.