

## Chapter 2: What God Gives to the Children of Man

*Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26*

In the first eleven verses of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher spoke in extreme, absolute generalities. He has captured our attention with his uncomfortable evaluation of everything in this world as “vanity of vanities,” but he knows that he needs to give evidence to back up his strong claims. In this next section, in Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26, the Preacher publishes the research from a grand experiment he has performed that has led him to his conclusions. As King over Israel, Solomon set out to find true, lasting, satisfaction, and ultimate joy in this world. He applied himself to searching out all pleasure and all wisdom, but he only ended up in vexation, sorrow, and despair. Nevertheless, the Preacher does not simply offer doom and gloom. Instead, he proclaims hope for this world that must come from outside this world: *God gives enjoyment to those who trust in him.*

### The Curse (Eccl. 1:12–18)

In Ecclesiastes 1:12, the Preacher once again identifies himself: “I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup> That this “son of David” (Eccl. 1:1) is “king over Israel” limits the author to Solomon alone, since after Solomon, the David kings did not reign over all Israel, but over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin only (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:16–24).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the rest of this section depends on the Solomonic authorship of the book, since the Preacher insists that he attempted to “search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (1:13), and that his great wisdom surpassed “all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16).<sup>3</sup> Unless Solomon is the author who possessed exceedingly great wisdom (cf. 1 Kgs. 3:1–14), then the scope of the great search proposed in 1:13 is limited, and the statement of the greatness of the author’s wisdom in 1:16 is false.

So, indeed, Solomon the Preacher turns in 1:13ff from the general principles he expressed in 1:1–11, toward a rigorous and thorough examination of all human pursuits and activities under the sun.<sup>4</sup> In 1:13, the Preacher explains that he “gave [his] heart” (lit.; ESV: “applied my heart”) to seek and search by wisdom all that is done under heaven. Then, as an executive summary of his findings, he reports that “It is an evil [ESV: “unhappy”] business that God *has given* to the children of man to be busy with.” We should notice the contrast of the word “give” right from the beginning, since this

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<sup>1</sup> While some translations have “I the Preacher *was* king over Israel in Jerusalem” (e.g., CEB, LEB, KJV, NIV), suggesting that the author *was* the king, but no longer *is*, the ESV rightly translates this as “have been” with a present perfect sense: e.g., “I have been and still am” (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 13.)

<sup>2</sup> Rehoboam had not yet begun to reign over all Israel (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:1–4) when he acted foolishly, prompting Jeroboam to lead the northern tribes of Israel in rebellion. Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 289.

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 28.

word will appear significantly through this passage, especially toward the end of chapter 2. Also, we should note that 1:13 is the first mention of “God” in this book.<sup>5</sup>

In his first statement about God, the Preacher makes an astonishing claim: God has given *evil* business to busy the children of man. Importantly, “evil” in Hebrew does not always mean *moral* evil. The Preacher is not charging God with sin. Rather, this has the sense of “misfortune” or “disaster,” so that “unhappy,” as the ESV has it, well captures the word’s specific meaning.<sup>6</sup> Even so, we should recognize that this is a very serious statement.

To understand what the Preacher means by this, it is important to understand where he is going on his quest to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. As we will see, the Preacher will test whether the original happiness and blessing at creation can be in any way regained after being lost at the Fall in Genesis 3. This statement that God has given an “unhappy business” to the children of man, then, refers back to the curse of sin that God placed on creation in response to the original sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:14–19).<sup>7</sup> We will see how this idea works out more fully in chapter 2, but we immediately find three initial statements to confirm this interpretation as a reference to the curse at the Fall into sin.

The first confirmation comes in the next verse, when the Preacher writes, “I have *seen* everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *vanity* and a striving after wind” (1:14). The word for “see” appears forty-seven times in Ecclesiastes, often to express the Preacher’s quest to find meaning under the sun.<sup>8</sup> In Ecclesiastes, the word “see” has a number of different meanings, sometimes referring to literal sight (1:8; 5:11; 12:3); other times meaning “observe, reflect, consider” (1:14; 2:12; etc.), or “conclude, realize” (2:3; 3:18; etc.), or “enjoy, experience” (1:16; 2:1; etc.).<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this word echoes the original sin back in Genesis 3:6: “When the woman *saw*...” Furthermore, we should remember that Paul uses the Greek translation for the word “vanity” (cf. 1:14) in Romans 8:20: “For the creation was subjected to *futility* [“vanity”]...” to describe the effects of the curse of the Fall.

The second confirmation comes in 1:15: “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” The enduring crookedness and lack in this world does not arise from any failure in God’s work of creation, since what he created was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). On the contrary, the crookedness and lack of this world arises from the curse that disrupts relationships and work from the good order in which God created them. This statement is an explanation for why the Preacher’s search for meaning under the sun will ultimately be doomed to fail: creation has been subjected to a kind of futility that cannot be overcome in this life!

We find the third confirmation in 1:16–18. Solomon reminds us that he has acquired great wisdom, surpassing all those over Jerusalem before him (1:16). Then, he insists that he “gave” (ESV: “applied”) his heart to know wisdom, as well as to know madness and folly—but this great experiment was only a “striving after wind” (1:17). Why?: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (1:18). Both the *process* of seeking wisdom will

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<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and J. J. Stamm, *HALOT*, 1251.

<sup>7</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 51–52.

<sup>9</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 75.

prove continually frustrating, and the *result* of seeking wisdom will sorrowfully reveal the strict limitations of our wisdom.<sup>10</sup> We should remember, though, that it was the desire for wisdom that gave the final push toward eating the forbidden fruit in the original sin: “When the woman saw... that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). Solomon is taking up that original experiment to see whether the pursuit of wisdom in this world can provide what Adam and Eve were seeking in their own pursuit for wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

The thrust of this section, then, is to set out a question: Given the reality of the Fall, is there any principle or pursuit that human beings can set themselves to, where they will be able to find true happiness? Is there any bit of wisdom or knowledge that will give us the secret to living well in this world? The Preacher proposes a comprehensive study of the question, where he himself will be both the researcher as well as the subject of the research.

## The Counter-Efforts (Eccl. 2:1–17)

Ecclesiastes 2, then, primarily narrates the many counter-efforts that the Preacher attempts to pursue in order to find such happiness and satisfaction. To begin, the Preacher sets himself to the test of *pleasure* (2:1a). Before describing the parameters of his study, the Preacher declares the results of his experimentation up front: “But behold, this also was vanity: (2:1b). Laughter was mere madness, and pleasure was useless (2:11). He even tested whether wine would do the trick, although the Preacher is careful to note that even when he experimented with alcohol, his heart was still guiding him with wisdom (2:3). He was not partying for the sake of partying, but on a serious, thoughtful experiment to discover some principle of wisdom that will lead to true joy and satisfaction.<sup>12</sup> Throughout all of this, part of him is standing back, evaluating everything he is experiencing.<sup>13</sup>

### The Counter-Effort of Pleasure (Eccl. 2:4–11)

The first major project to counteract the effects of the curse of sin is through pleasure from ambitious achievement: “I made great works” (2:4). On one level, the many works that the Preacher identifies here in Ecclesiastes 2:4–8 line up with Solomon’s wealth and accomplishments that are celebrated elsewhere in the Bible (cf. 1 Kgs. 3–11).<sup>14</sup> We have here, then, one more clue that the unnamed Preacher is, indeed, Solomon.

More than this, however, Arian Verheij draws attention to the fact that a great number of words and phrases in this passage echo the language of creation and the garden of Eden from Genesis 1–2: “to plant” (Eccl. 2:5; cf. Gen. 2:8), “garden” (Eccl. 2:5; cf. Gen. 2:8, 9, 10, 15, 16); “tree/all/fruit” (Eccl. 2:5; cf. Gen. 1:11, 12, 29; 2:9, 16, 17); “to water/drench” (Eccl. 2:6; cf. Gen. 2:5, 9); “to sprout” (Eccl. 2:6; cf. Gen. 1:7, 16, 25, 26); “to work, make” (Eccl. 2:5, 6; Gen. 1:7, 16, 25, 26, 31; 2:2, 2, 3, 4,

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<sup>10</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 54–55.

18).<sup>15</sup> As Verheij notes, “Taken separately, these words are not remarkable: for the most part they are indeed very common in Biblical Hebrew. It is their combined occurrence here and in Genesis that establishes a firm link between the texts.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we should note the occurrence of the rare word “paradise” (פַּרְדֵּיס; *pardēs*; ESV: “parks”; 2:5).<sup>17</sup> This is, then, as Kidner writes, “a secular Garden of Eden, full of civilized and agreeably uncivilized delights (8), with no forbidden fruits—or none that he regards as such (10).”<sup>18</sup>

The Preacher notes that the experiment had modest success. He became so great as to surpass all who were before him in Jerusalem (2:9). He gave himself to anything and everything he wanted, whether what his eyes desired, or what pleased his heart (2:10a).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Preacher reports that, “my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil” (2:10b). This is an important point that we will revisit later. As Charles Bridges explains, “God would have us *rejoice in our labour*—enjoy our earthly blessings, but not rest in them.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in the final evaluation, even these modest successes were nothing in the face of the overall failure of the project: “behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11). Whatever pleasures they gained were insubstantial and of no lasting value.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the success of the Preacher’s secular garden of Eden stands in contrast to God’s original garden of Eden. Where God saw that everything he had made was “very good,” the preacher recognizes that his own work is ultimately worthless and of no lasting value.<sup>22</sup>

### The Counter-Effort of Wisdom (Eccl. 2:12–17)

Next, the Preacher turns to consider wisdom, and the madness of folly (2:12a). The second statement in 2:12 is difficult to translate: “For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done” (2:12b). Who is “the man” referred to here, and who is “the king”? Duane Garrett observes that “man” is the word (*’ādām*) often refers to the children of Adam, so that he argues that “the king” refers to “Adam” himself, since Adam was created to be not only the father, but also the rightful king, of the whole human race.<sup>23</sup> This makes good sense in the context: if Adam in the original garden of Eden did not succeed, then how can all the children of Adam succeed if even a recreated garden of Eden (cf. 2:4–6) fails to bring satisfaction?

This is a question of wisdom: What is the *wise* way for the children of Adam to live out our days

<sup>15</sup> Arian J. C. Verheij, “Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4–6,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16, no. 50 (June 1991): 114.

<sup>16</sup> Verheij, 114.

<sup>17</sup> “Indeed, the language in these verses is rather uninteresting, with the exception of *parks*. The Hebrew word *pardēsīm* is apparently a loanword related to Persian *pair:daēza*. The word means “enclosure” and is also found in Nehemiah 2:8 and Song of Songs 4:13....” (Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 91.)

<sup>18</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> “Eyes and heart point to the outward and inward aspect of his pleasures. Nothing was withheld that might be visibly entertaining or inwardly satisfying” (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 79).

<sup>20</sup> Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 18–19.

<sup>22</sup> Verheij, “Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4–6,” 114–15.

<sup>23</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 293–94.

in this fallen world? As in the experimentation with pleasure, the Preacher reports modest success in evaluating wisdom: “Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (2:13–14a). Wisdom does give advantages for those who live according to it, helping the children of fallen Adam to see (and avoid) the most obvious pitfalls and traps that remain hidden, which those who walk in darkness without wisdom cannot see. Even so, the scope of this success is strictly limited: “And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them” (2:14b). No matter how many traps the wise may avoid, they cannot ultimately avoid death.<sup>24</sup> Shaw puts it this way: “Wisdom, while having a practical utility for this life, cannot answer the ultimate questions. That is why philosophers are continually squalling over the meaning of life. Human wisdom does not provide the answers.”<sup>25</sup>

If wisdom cannot help the wise to avoid death, the Preacher asks a very shrewd question: “Why then have I been so very wise?” (2:15). To live wisely is hard, so if wise living cannot really gain that much, is the difficulty required by wisdom really worth it? The wise will die just like the fool, so why shouldn’t the wise also live like the fool (cf. 2:16)! In other words, is it *wise* to live *wisely*? This dilemma is so grievous and evil that, when the Preacher fully sees it, he even hates life, “for all is vanity and a striving after wind” (2:17). The counter-effort of pleasure and the counter-effort of wisdom both fail. Neither can provide what they promise.

## The Conclusions (Eccl. 2:18–26)

After this grand experiment, the Preacher draws two conclusions that work in two very different directions. The first conclusion (Eccl. 2:18–23) is a conclusion of despair: “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun...” (2:18a). Here, the Preacher introduces a new source of “vanity” under the sun: namely, that we all must leave the fruit of our toil to the man who comes after us—especially since we don’t know whether that man will be wise or a fool (2:18b–19).<sup>26</sup> That all the fruits of our toil are left to a person who did not toil for them is, the Preacher says, not only a “vanity,” but also “a great evil” (2:21). The inevitable conclusion to all this is that man really gains nothing from his toil and striving (2:22). Ultimately, “all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity” (2:23).

This is the only logical conclusion of a thoroughgoing secularism in this world. If there is nothing beyond this life, then our looming deaths render absolutely every pursuit in this world into pure vanity and meaninglessness. No matter how hard you toil, you gain nothing, since you cannot keep any of it. Nothing is left but despair in the face of this grievous evil. This conclusion explains the deep despair of this world apart from the hope of the gospel of Christ. The Preacher wants us to stare this first conclusion in the face so that he can clear away any lingering illusions of gain in this world.

It is the second conclusion, then, that gives us some glimmer to the hope that we do have in this world (2:24–26). We are not left in utter hopelessness and despair, even though we must realize that

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<sup>24</sup> Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 25.

we cannot finally gain anything of lasting value here. Our hope, then, must be directed above and beyond this world—that is, above and beyond all that is “under the sun.” So, the Preacher mentions “God” for the second time, telling us about something else that God gives us (beyond the curse from sin; cf. 1:13):<sup>27</sup> “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God” (2:24).

The Preacher is telling us that we should not too quickly dismiss the modest gains that he discovered in his pursuit for lasting satisfaction. While they are not of value in themselves, their value comes from their source: God. So, he continues: “. . .for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (2:25). These gifts of God cannot bring lasting satisfaction by themselves. If we ask them to bear that weight, they will buckle under the pressure as mere vanity and a striving after wind. On the other hand, if we enjoy them not so much for themselves, but as a way of enjoying *God* through those good gifts, then we can experience the goodness of God’s creation in them. As Derek Kidner writes, “rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good. . . .What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give; a symptom of the longing which differentiates us from the beasts, but whose misdirection is the underlying theme of this book.”<sup>28</sup> Or, as Roger Whybray argues, Ecclesiastes teaches that “*God* may give joy and pleasure; *man* can never achieve it for himself, however hard he may try.”<sup>29</sup>

So, to the one who pleases God by faith, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy in life; however, the one who does not look in faith to God has only the meaningless business of gathering and collecting—work that will ultimately only benefit those who trust in God (2:26). The toil of the faithless one is vanity and a striving after wind, but the one who lives by faith experiences something very different, even though both are doing the same work. Namely, the one who lives apart from faith has only the vanity and ultimate meaninglessness of his work to show for his efforts, while the one who lives by faith has a value and ultimate meaning that he experiences through his work, but that transcends his work. Namely, he experiences the pleasures and goodness of *God* in his work.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What does the Preacher mean when he says that God “has given” an unhappy business to the children of man (1:13; cf. Rom. 8:20)? How does he characterize the broken, fallen, sinful nature of this world (1:15)? How does what the Preacher writes here accord with what the rest of the Bible says about this world because of sin? What does the Preacher hope to find by applying his heart (1:13) and acquiring wisdom (1:16)? What does he ultimately find instead (1:17–18)?
- 2) How does the Preacher test the pleasure of laughter and wine (2:1–3)? How does he test the pleasure of achievements and accomplishments (2:4–6)? How does he test the pleasure of wealth (2:7–8)? What modest gains does the Preacher find in his various tests (2:9–10)? In spite of these modest gains, why does the Preacher nevertheless consider the results of his tests to be “vanity” and a

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<sup>27</sup> Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Roger N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7, no. 23 (July 1982): 89.

“striving after wind,” with “nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11)?

3) How does the Preacher test wisdom (2:12–17)? What modest gains does he discover in the wisdom that he tests (2:13–14a)? Why, then, does the Preacher ultimately reject wisdom as nothing more than “vanity and a striving after wind” (2:17)? How should we balance this rejection of ultimate meaning in wisdom, with the wisdom that God everywhere commends to us in the Bible? What does God’s wisdom entail that the Preacher’s experimental, worldly wisdom does not (cf. Prov. 1:7)?

4) What two conclusions does the Preacher come to in his work (2:18–26)? Why does the Preacher first come to such a conclusion of despair (2:18–23)? After all his modest gains, why do none of them rise to anything beyond mere vanity? In what sense, though, does the Preacher offer a second conclusion of faith (2:24–26)? In this life, what can we reasonably expect as we walk by faith? How does Ecclesiastes help us to avoid worldliness and to look to Christ?