

Ecclesiastes 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes chapter 2. I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad. And of pleasure, what use is it? 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, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 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. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great, and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

Also my wisdom remained with me, and whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure. My heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

Then 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.

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. 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 his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For 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. How the wise dies just like the fool.

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity, and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool. Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For 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. 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. For apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy. But to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, the preacher continues his exploration to discover if there is anything of lasting and enduring value. He wants to find out if there is any gain to be found. Daniel

[3 : 52] Fredericks argues that verses 1 to 3 need to be associated more with the preceding chapter than with that which follows. Verse 3, he claims, is a bookend or inclusio with verse 13 of chapter 1.

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. The experiments that he engages in in verses 1 to 3 are similar to those of verses 12 to 15 and 16 to 18 of chapter 1. The preacher will later make some positive claims about enjoyment, although it is nonetheless here included with the vapour.

Fredericks cautions against presuming that the answers to the preacher's rhetorical questions in verse 2 are negative. He maintains that the preacher holds a distinction between laughter and pleasure, a distinction that can be substantiated by study of the rest of the book. Rather than thinking that the rhetorical questions are immediately answered, perhaps we are being invited to follow the preacher's investigations to their conclusion to discover his thoughts on these matters. There is a parallel between the relationship that the preacher establishes between his body and wine and that between himself and wisdom. He drags his body along with wine, while his heart guides him along with wisdom. He experiments with what he calls folly, in keeping with his intended quest outlined in chapter 1 verse 17, and I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. Drinking alcohol as such is not condemned in scripture, although drunkenness and allowing oneself to come under wine's power is. The preacher seems concerned to explore wine's potential as a source of pleasure and release, although he is also concerned not to give himself over to it in a way that would undermine his quest. He wants to explore folly without abandoning himself to it.

How we interpret the nature of the preacher's quest here might be coloured by our beliefs concerning his identity. If the preacher is a persona of the great and wise Solomonic king, a fictional character created by the author of Ecclesiastes, rather than Solomon himself, we may allow him rather more liberties in this area. However, we should also consider the fact that the historical Solomon did take a path of folly himself, so we need not presume that his exploration of wine was a particularly sober one, even if it was part of a mindful investigation.

Furthermore, folly need not be read in a stronger sense. Drinking wine allows even the wise man temporarily to experience the folly of light intoxication, without surrendering his wisdom to do so. The folly of wine might be akin to the laughter of verse 2. Those who surrender themselves to wine and laughter are fools.

[6 : 33] However, moderated by wisdom, wine and laughter need not be foolish at all. They provide a measure of relaxation and release, which may, in their own ways, serve the wise person, who might otherwise be too weighed down in his toil to be able to establish any distance from it. Wine and laughter can be the servants of rest.

Verses 4-9 describe the preacher's kingly activity of creating a world of delights. Many commentators, rightly I believe, see parallels with the Lord's activity of planting Eden in Genesis chapter 2 here, although Catherine Dell expresses reservations, suggesting that what intertextual connections there are have been greatly overstated. The opening chapters of 1 Kings present a similar portrait of the creation of the creation of a new Eden in its description of Solomon's earlier reign, his construction of the temple, his adorning of the city of Jerusalem with great and beautiful buildings, and the visit of the Queen of Sheba. There are several allusions in those chapters back to the early chapters of Genesis. Whether or not we believe that the preacher was Solomon, he is clearly the figure most evoked by the preacher's description of his work here.

Humanity was always called to follow God's pattern in forming and filling the world, to create their own beautiful worlds. The preacher, as the king in Jerusalem, makes the city a sort of great garden city, filled with beauty, riches, pleasure and delight.

The point of this exercise was not merely the pleasures to be enjoyed within the realm, but also the wise activity of forming the realm itself, an activity that, in many respects, follows the pattern of God's own activity. However, after creating this great and beautiful realm, and enjoying the satisfaction of creation and all of its sensual pleasures and delights, he returns to consider his labours in terms of the question of chapter 1 verse 3.

What does man gain by all of the toil at which he toils under the sun? There are definitely benefits and advantages to his labour and its transitory rewards, but they are just that, they are transitory. They do not represent the sort of lasting gain that he is seeking. They are good, but they are still vapour, destined to pass away without trace in their time.

[8 : 45] Compared to folly, wisdom is clearly to be preferred. Indeed, for the preacher, it is to folly as day is to night. There is considerably more gain to it. However, in the end, both the wise man and the fool will pass away, and their wisdom and folly with them. They will die, and ultimately be forgotten, as he argues in verse 16. The legacy of both will ultimately fail, be misused, be abandoned, or be forgotten.

The meaning of the past is in many respects at the mercy of the future. Our labour and our sacrifices are of little worth if their benefits are despised and squandered by those who come after us.

Our lives are retroactively robbed of meaning. This is why children dishonouring their parents and despising their sacrifices can be so painful. When we invest our lives in establishing a good legacy, we put the meaning of much of our lives at the mercy of our children and others who come after us, with no guarantees that they will respect and honour our labours and ensure that our sacrifices achieve their fruit. Solomon was tragically doomed to leave a vast and glorious kingdom to a proud son who would precipitate a catastrophic split and the loss of most of its riches. The preacher sums up the results of his investigation in verses 22-23. He experiences sorrow and vexation and lacks rest. Solomon's great works reached their zenith in 1 Kings, 500 years after the Exodus, when he completed the great temple and palace complex in Jerusalem. It would have seemed that, of all times when rest or Sabbath might have been achieved, it was in that time, a year of jubilee times ten. However, restlessness was still the outcome. All is fleeting vapour, slipping through our fingers, beyond our attempts to grasp and control, to attain lasting substance, or to say at any point that we have truly arrived. Again, none of this means that wisdom, joy and life's pleasures are worthless. They have their value. They are gifts to be received from

God in our toil. They're signs of God's goodness. Indeed, there's nothing better than to enjoy these transitory things, even as we appreciate that they are nonetheless vapour. Every breath is a remarkable gift from God, even though little is more transitory than a breath. Wisdom is finding delight in the vapour, without losing sight of its vaporous character. We discover God's goodness in the transitory but good joys of life. We also see his justice in the way that God elevates some and brings others low in order to serve the righteous. This too is transitory, however, but it is good in its time.

A question to consider. How might this chapter be read against the backdrop of Genesis chapters 1 to 4?

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