

# ***Ecclesiastes***

## **Chapter 2**

### *The Vanity of Self-Indulgence*

**I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” 3 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. 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 had also 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 provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And 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 expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.**

**2:1–11** The Teacher now shows that mere pleasure cannot give meaning or satisfaction. (CSB)

**2:1** *I said in my heart.* Solomon examines the rewards of reason and nonreason, sensual and aesthetic pleasure, the creative enterprise, the connoisseur, the collector and activist. His goal is to explore what life might be for the ideally gifted and advantaged. Luther: “We should not find enjoyment in happiness, goods, our own counsels, or any other thing; only as God has given them should we use them. One should let God have His way. It is not up to us to prescribe the place, the person, or the manner; if we do, we shall go wrong. This does not mean that happiness is condemned as something evil or vain. What is condemned is human striving and planning, when we ourselves want or try to create happiness without respect to the will of God. But as both come from God, so let us use them.... Sorrow, happiness, and all such things, whether external or internal, must not be measured on the basis of places, times, etc.; but as they come from God in His complete freedom, so one should use them in complete freedom” (AE 15:30). (TLSB)

To us “heart” means either the physical organ or the emotional side of a person. The Jews rarely referred to the heart in a strictly physical sense, but as that which included man’s entire inner life of thoughts, will, emotions and personality. The Hebrew word for heart contains a wide range of meanings. It occurs three times in these three verses and each time is translated in a different way: heart (verse 1), myself (verse 3), mind (verse 3). (PBC)

*test you with pleasure* – The Preacher here records his next experiment, which was to find good in the pleasures of sense. (CB)

His experiment with wisdom had led to emptiness. And so the king gave himself – his heart – to the pursuit of pleasure. Before he even gets into the details of this pursuit, Solomon presents the results. He found living for pleasure meaningless and foolish. (PBC)

**2:2** Diversion can bring relief, but in excess it can bring foolishness and fruitlessness. Diversion cannot appease a guilty conscience, heal a sorrowful spirit, or satisfy the soul. *pleasure*. Lit, “good.” (TLSB)

**2:3** *cheer my body with wine* – Solomon explores the pleasures of the palate and flesh. (TLSB)

*lay hold on folly* – By folly he means the pleasures of sense. On these he laid hold, that he might learn what good they had to bestow. (CB)

He intentionally acquainted himself with wisdom to carefully manage his use of sensual pleasures. (TLSB)

*I might see what was good*. From first to last (v. 9) the author used wisdom to discover the good (v. 1) and the worthwhile (v. 3). (CSB)

He pursued pleasure with discretion, as an earnest man who was seeking to find what is the true good. (CB)

He didn’t give himself over to mindless debauchery and drunkenness. No, he wanted to have his cake and eat it too, to lick the honey and avoid the gall. Solomon wanted to keep his senses, while indulging himself so he could determine what was “worthwhile” to do with one’s life. (PBC)

In spite of Solomon’s efforts at self-control, the picture we see is that of a desperate man, groping anywhere he can to find meaning in life. How far King Solomon had drifted from his youth, when in humility he knelt before the Lord and prayed, “Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?” (1 Kings 3:9) As Solomon describes himself in Ecclesiastes, he had become a man who was trying to get by without God. (PBC)

Many people never go beyond “cheering themselves with wine, and embracing folly.” Drinking and laughter seem to be the be-all and end-all for many. Even when engaged in with restraint, pleasure can become an addiction. It can become a god which controls our lives. (PBC)

The Lord Jesus may have based one of His parables on these verses of Ecclesiastes. The parable describes a man who said to himself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12:19). God’s verdict on this man was severe: “You fool!” Such is the Creator’s judgment of those who live for nothing but eating, drinking and amusement. (PBC)

*few days of their life* – Wordplay in Hbr (*shamayim ... yeme*). The brevity of life and service to the Lord should be guided by His Word, not by seeking pleasure alone. It is good to do the work of the Lord. (TLSB)

**2:4–9** See 1Ki 4–11, which tells of Solomon’s splendor and of his wives. (CSB)

**2:4-6** Cf 1Ki 4–11; 6:38. Archaeology confirms Solomon’s extensive building projects throughout Israel. (TLSB)

Now the king turns from personal indulgence to personal achievement. In verses 4-6 he describes what he built for himself. Notable by its absence from this list is Solomon’s greatest architectural achievement – the temple. But, of course, that would not fit in here. Built for the glory of the eternal God, the temple’s purpose far transcended the self-serving projects here described with the constant repetition of “I.” (PBC)

Solomon begins by telling us that he not only built, but also that he carried out his projects in a grandiose way. “I understood great projects.” He then proceeds to enumerate his accomplishments. “I built houses for myself.” 1 Kings 7 describes Solomon’s palaces. It took Solomon thirteen years [compared with seven for the temple], to complete the construction of his palace. He built the throne hall, the Hall of Justice, where he was to judge, and he covered it with cedar from floor to ceiling. And the palace in which he was to live, set farther back, was similar in design. Solomon also made a palace like this hall for Pharaoh’s daughter, whom he had married. (1 Kings 7:1-12) (PBC)

**2:4** *great works* – Building a great empire might bring lasting satisfaction and great dignity (cf 1Ki 4–11). (TLSB)

*I planted vineyards* – The Song of Songs says of this, “Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver” (Song of Songs 8:11). Perhaps because the king had vineyards, it became the fashion throughout Israel: During Solomon’s lifetime Judah had Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25) (PBC)

**2:5-6** Solomon attempts to make paradise on earth. But the re-creation of all things can only happen at Christ’s return in glory (Rv 21–22). (TLSB)

**2:5** *I made myself gardens and parks* – The word for parks is *pardes*, possibly of Persian or Eastern origin, and the from which our term “paradise” comes. In this statement we again see the luxury of Solomon’s reign, bringing to mind images of the “hanging gardens” of Babylon or of the gardens of the kings of Persia. It is still a source of pride and a sign of wealth among rich people of the Middle East to have gardens with “all kinds of fruit trees in them.” (PBC)

Orchards and timber trees were irrigated by pools through aqueducts (cf 2Sm 2:13; 4:12). (TLSB)

**2:6** *I made myself pools* – Some 500 years after Solomon’s time Nehemiah mentioned the “King’s Pool” in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:14). The Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37-95) called this “Solomon’s Pool.” The function of Solomon’s reservoirs was to furnish water for his many trees. (PBC)

**2:7** *I bought male and female slaves* – Purchased and intentionally propagated to do physical labor, thousands of slaves were required. Cf 1Ki 5:13; 9:22. (TLSB)

Now he introduces a third and final element, also beginning with “p” his possessions. It seems that here, too, Solomon did not hold back. We are told that when the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she was “overwhelmed” (1 Kings 10:5) at “the attending servants in their robes,” among other things. With all his servants, the picture is once again that of an oriental potentate of fabulous wealth and power. (PBC)

*I had also great possessions of herds and flocks* – It is interesting that Solomon proceeds directly from his servants to his cattle and sheep. Had he in fallen state looked upon his slaves as mere chattel? King Solomon owned more livestock than anyone before him in Jerusalem. This might help explain how at the dedication of the temple he could sacrifice 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats! (1 Kings 8:63) (PBC)

Signs of wealth in agrarian cultures. Solomon's family started as shepherds. He does not talk about his wife and children but about extended family, namely, slaves and concubines in his household. (TLSB)

**2:8** *treasurers of kings and provinces* – Treasure contributed by kings by the provinces. (1 Kings 4:21; Exodus 19:5) (CB)

The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents [about 25 tons] ... All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's day... Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift – articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules... The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones... (1 Kings 11:3) (PBC)

*concubines*. The Hebrew for this word occurs only here in Scripture. The meaning seems to be indicated in an early Egyptian letter that uses a similar Canaanite term for concubines. It fits the situation of Solomon, who had 300 concubines in addition to 700 wives (1Ki 11:3). (CSB)

Hbr for "harem" occurs only here in Scripture but is similar to the Canaanite term used for concubines. Solomon had 300 concubines and 700 wives (1Ki 3:1; 11:1–13). Such marriages typically involved diplomatic, political, and business relationships. (TLSB)

**2:9** *my wisdom remained with me* – Though he had departed from the Lord, the king still had been able to maintain a sense of balance. In his state of apostasy he would not have been inclined to acknowledge it, but it was only God's grace that kept Solomon from going the way so many other absolute rulers have gone, the way of overindulgence to ultimate ruin. (PBC)

From vv 1–9, wisdom discovered the good (v 1) and the worthwhile (v 3). (TLSB)

**2:10-11** Terms for "toil" and "work" appear more than 25 times in Ec. Work brought pleasure. But reviewing the pleasure he sought and the great accomplishments gained, Solomon gained no advantage or satisfaction because there was no profit "under the sun." Even with wisdom, toil is meaningless apart from the fear of God. (TLSB)

**2:10** *kept my heart from no pleasure* – Like a spoiled child, Solomon got whatever he wanted. (PBC)

*toil*. A key thought in Ecclesiastes is the meaninglessness (v. 11), apart from God, of toil, labor, work—words that occur more than 25 times. (CSB)

Again Solomon shows how he had fallen from faith. He had come to call his accomplishments, "the work of my hands" and "the labor at which I toiled." Later we will see how Solomon attributes earthly blessings to God. But in recounting his experiences here, he takes the viewpoint

of natural man, who sees only his own efforts but fails to see the hidden God who has given him success. (PBC)

**2:11** *considered all* – God gave to Solomon all of this world that heart could wish, with wisdom to enjoy it in the highest degree. Yet, after a full experience, he pronounced the whole to be “vanity and a chasing after the wind.” From this we learn the “folly” of hoping to gain from this world a satisfying good, and the true wisdom of going to God for blessedness. (CB)

Solomon did what so many people have tried out since; instead of accepting the statements of God’s Word concerning that which is good and beneficial to them, they determine to try out for themselves what is good and so are obligated to learn through many bitter and painful experiences. Solomon, having the means, took every opportunity for his experiment. (PBC)

**2:1–11** The pursuit of pleasure can draw us away from the Lord and toward other altars, as Solomon turned to other gods and idols before returning to God (cf Mt 6:19–24). When we return thanks to God for His gracious and simple gifts—house and home, flocks and herds, spouse and children—we focus on His fatherly mercy and kindness. • O Lord Christ, help us! Strengthen our faith and trust in You. We receive all of our treasures in You alone. We are poor; You are rich. Grant us Your faith and righteousness that we might trust and remain in Your everlasting love for all eternity, through Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)

*The Vanity of Living Wisely*

**12 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. 13 Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 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. 15 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. 16 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! 17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.**

**2:12–17** The Teacher returns to the folly of trying to find satisfaction in merely human wisdom. (CSB)

**2:12** *consider wisdom and madness and folly* – To compare them together. The Preacher had found both earthly wisdom and folly to be vanity and he now inquires what advantage the former has over the latter. (CB)

Wisdom is the constant in Solomon’s searching and testing. We have seen for example, how his indulgence with wine was tempered with wisdom. Because wisdom underlies all of Solomon’s testing of life, it is not surprising that he should frequently return to the topic. (PBC)

*what can the man the man do who comes after the king?* – As much to say, “None can be more competent to make this comparison; for who that comes after me in this inquiry will be able to add any thing new to my experience? (CB)

Wealth, pomp, and grandeur of Solomon’s kingdom could be inherited; his wisdom could not. His heir (Rehoboam; 1Ki 12) needed to gain wisdom by study and experience. The Lord had

allowed Solomon to build the temple and palace, but Solomon may still have felt insignificant in the eyes of Israel when compared with his father, King David. (TLSB)

In other words, “If I couldn’t find satisfaction in the tremendous projects I completed, what reason is there to suppose the next generation will somehow find the answers?” Some three thousand years have passed since Solomon’s time. Yet for all the generations that have come and gone, mankind is no closer to finding the meaning of life. (PBC)

**2:13** Pleasure of wisdom, though not enough to make people happy, is better than folly. Folly eclipses and clouds the mind. (TLSB)

*is more gain in wisdom than in folly.* Even secular wisdom is better than folly, but in the end it is of no value, since “the same fate overtakes them both” (i.e., overtakes both the wise believer and the foolish unbeliever, v. 14; see Ps 49:10). (CSB)

**2:14** eyes. Understanding. (CSB)

*in his head* – Where he can use them to good purpose. This is the superiority of wisdom over folly. (CB)

Refers to wisdom, which discovers danger and advantage; it knows where to step. (TLSB)

*darkness* – Makes one lose the way and perchance fall into a pit from which there is no rescue. A fool (Pr 1:22) is one who disdains knowledge. Wisdom reveres God; foolishness does not. (TLSB)

*same event happens to all of them* – Wise men and fools are alike subject to suffering and death; so that here, wisdom has no advantage over folly. We must carefully remember that he is speaking of earthly advantages of wisdom. Compare the words of the apostle: “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” (1 Cor. 15:19) (KJV) (CB)

**2:15** *same event happens to all of them* – The same dangers can overcome both the wise and foolish, and death, the great equalizer, ultimately devours both. Only faith in the Lord saves. Luth: “Wisdom is beneficial, then, if I do what I know is pleasing to God and commit to Him what He wishes to be accomplished through me. If we did this, then at last we would be truly wise” (AE 15:42). (TLSB)

Since wisdom, the most excellent of all earthly possessions, cannot exempt men from suffering, disappointment, and, death, which are also the lot of fools, it is manifest that God designs this world to a place of trial for men, and not their final portion. It is only when we thus regard and use it, that it ceases to be vanity. (CB)

Solomon doesn’t mean mere chance or blind fate. Nowhere does the Bible teach that. The word might better be translated as “event” (King James), or “happening.” Solomon is saying, “What happens to the fool will happen to me. (PBC)

**2:16** People tend to soon forget even the greatest leaders and heroes (see 1:11). (CSB)

Those who are wise and foolish by the world’s standards have their names written in the dust of the earth (cf 1Co 1:20). The believer’s name is written in heaven (Lk 10:20). (TLSB)

As biting as death itself is, the oblivion into which all must pass makes death even more bitter. As time marches on, no one will care about those died years before. Few will even remember. (PBC)

Of course, Solomon is still speaking of things under the sun. The believer knows there is a gracious God who never forgets His own. “A righteous man will be remembered forever” (Psalm 112:6). (PBC)

After skillfully building up to it, Solomon ends this section with the “punch line”: “Like the fool, the wise man too must die!” All human pride in wisdom is demolished with this statement. Both wise men and fools end up the same six feet under. (PBC)

**2:12-17** In the end, life is vanity apart from faith in the Lord. The end is the same for the wise and the foolish. All that is done in the absence of faith will become chaff thrown into the devouring fire. Christ bids us to come to Him and be yoked to His light burden. Seek first His kingdom and His gifts, and all other things shall be given. • Heavenly Father, everlasting God, where would we be if You were to forsake us? How quickly the educated become infants; the prudent, simple; the wise, fools! Keep us in the fervor of faith and daily increase it through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen. (TLSB)

#### *The Vanity of Toil*

**18 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, 19 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. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 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. 22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 23 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. 24 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment[c] in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart from him[d] who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 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 one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.**

**2:17** *I hated all my toil* – This brings to mind Christ’s statement, “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Solomon describes himself as a weary embittered worldling. Christ speaks of the man of faith who overcomes this dying, sinful world by clinging to that which is eternal. Yet the two are not so far apart as they might first appear. The person whose heart is filled with despair and hatred of his earthly life is often ripe for the good news of Christ and His victorious love. (PBC)

Solomon soon became weary of his labor and looked upon it with contempt. It burdened and fatigued him as he aged and his sorrow increased. This world is a vale of tears even for the privileged. Those who are burdened are invited to come to the Lord for rest (Mt 11:28). (TLSB)

**2:18** *I toil under the sun* – Estate accumulated by labor. (CB)

*leave them to the one who comes after me.* Death ultimately separates from us our profits (cf Jb 8:9). They pass to the next generation (cf v 21; Lk 12:20). (TLSB)

Another sad disadvantage under which the wise man labors. He must leave all his estate to his successor, who may be a fool – as Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, actually was in comparison with his father. (CB)

This verse has the same ring to it as God’s words to the rich fool, “Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” Solomon’s concern about the person who will come after him is not simply a generalized statement of truth. He brings it home to his own life. Perhaps when he wrote this he was having serious doubts about his son Rehoboam. As it turned out, Rehoboam did bring many of Solomon’s spectacular achievements to ruin (1 Kings 12). (PBC)

**2:19** *who knows ... ?* For a more searching “Who knows ... ?” for secular man see 3:21. (CSB)

A wise person increases an inheritance; a fool squanders it and undoes the master’s work (cf Mt 25:14–30). Solomon is likely considering his son Rehoboam and other potential heirs. Rehoboam’s high taxation (1Ki 12:1–20; 2Ch 10) led Israel to revolt. (TLSB)

**2:20** *despair* – Meaninglessness creates despair and depression. (TLSB)

**2:21** *must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toiled for it* – As if obsessed with the thought, the Teacher repeats the fact that the wealth of an industrious man often falls into the hand of a good-for-nothing. What is it that makes this such “a great misfortune” (literally, “a great evil”)? It is one those things that make life so unfair. Not only does a person struggle and sweat for a lifetime, but he goes down to the grave without any guarantee that what he leaves behind will be appreciated or used wisely. (PBC)

**2:22-23** Humans cannot add a single moment to their life span (Mt 6:27; Lk 12:16–21). Disappointment is guaranteed. (TLSB)

**2:23** *all his days are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation* – Though written centuries ago by a Jewish king, it could have been written yesterday by an American businessman. (PBC)

When overcome by daily business and hopeful for evening rest, one spends the night with eyes open, heart pounding, brain in full process worrying about things to come. (TLSB)

**2:24–25** The heart of Ecclesiastes, a theme repeated in 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7 and climaxed in 12:13. Only in God does life have meaning and true pleasure. Without him nothing satisfies, but with him we find satisfaction and enjoyment. True pleasure comes only when we acknowledge and revere God (12:13). (CSB)

**2:24** **MAN CAN DO NOTHING BETTER** – It is our duty and privilege to receive with glad and thankful hearts the gifts of God’s providence, and to enjoy them without anxious thought for the morrow. Thus we gain from them all the good which they are capable of yielding. But unless we lift our hearts upwards from the gifts of God the infinite Giver, we shall find “this too is a chasing of the wind.” (CB)

*enjoyment* – Theme is repeated in 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7. Blatant hedonism is not suggested here. We are to receive God’s gifts and use them cheerfully, knowing they will never bring absolute happiness (12:13). (TLSB)



*toil* – Note 2:10-11 TLSB – Terms for “toil” and “work” appear more than 25 times in Ec. Work brought pleasure. But reviewing the pleasure he sought and the great accomplishments gained, Solomon gained no advantage or satisfaction because there was no profit “under the sun.” Even with wisdom, toil is meaningless apart from the fear of God. (TLSB)

*from the hand of God* – Small Catechism – Fourth Petition, p xxxviii; cf Ps 145:15–16; Ac 17:28; Eph 5:20. (TLSB)

**2:25** *apart from him* – How can one follow the Teacher’s advice and find satisfaction in his work, when as Solomon has so powerfully demonstrated, labor is meaningless and a chasing after the wind? The king immediately answers that this is possible one from the hand of God (V 24). God’s hand symbolizes his power, and that power is boundless. As Jesus said, “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). (PBC)

**2:26** *one who pleases him* – Here faith enters the picture. Only faith in Christ can pierce through this fallen world’s dark cloud of vanity to see the bright love and mercy of the almighty God. The person who “pleases God” is none other than the believer. Scripture states, “Without faith, it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). (PBC)

*but to the sinner.* For exceptions to this general principle see 8:14; Ps 73:1–12. (CSB)

For the sinner, gifts are easily corrupted and exploited for pleasure. They tantalize, tyrannize, and imprison. True wisdom comes from God alone (cf Ps 111:10; Pr 2:6; Christ is wise: 1Co 1:24, 30). The passage describes God’s judgment over both faith and works. (TLSB)

Though all are sinners, the term here applies only to the unbelieving, unrepentant sinner. This sinner possesses nothing, while the believer receives all good things. (PBC)

*who pleases God* – Not necessarily the righteous, but whomever God allows to inherit. (TLSB)

*this also is vanity* – Enjoying one’s labor is the most that one can gain from it, yet it is unsatisfying. (CB)

**2:18–26** toil and labor “under the sun” can drive one to the brink of grievous despair. The so-called significant things of this life become idols that ultimately pass away and provide no lasting value in the context of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ (cf Mt 6:19-24). Our gracious heavenly Father extends his Son, our Lord \* Most precious heavenly Father, you have given us many priceless gifts by your gracious hand. We ask not for silver or gold but for a strong and firm faith. Let us not live for pleasure in things of the world, but comfort and refresh us in your healing Word. Then in right faith, we may trust in your grace to the very end. Amen. (TLSB)