

## SESSION 2

# THE PROBLEM WITH PLEASURE

### ▶ **The Point**

Pleasures and possessions don't offer lasting joy.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Roman Catholics and many Protestant denominations observe Lent, a time when they fast from some desired thing for forty days prior to Easter. They begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, but observers use the Tuesday before as their last day to eat fatty foods. That day became known as "Fat Tuesday"—or as we commonly know it: *Mardi Gras*. Somewhere along the way, *Mardi Gras* changed from a time to indulge in fatty foods to a pursuit of every kind of carnal and sinful pleasure. Many cities and regions celebrate *Mardi Gras*, but this worldly pursuit is perhaps most closely associated with the French Quarter in New Orleans. But people don't have to wait for *Mardi Gras* to pursue countless worldly pleasures. We live in a day and age where the pursuit of pleasure is available at the click of a mouse or a call on a cell phone. Today's world lives for pleasure. If you want it, buy it. Don't hold back from whatever you want to make you happy. Worldly pleasures may seem enjoyable, but the enjoyment is brief and temporary. Worldly pleasures will always leave us empty.

### ▶ **The Setting**

Wisdom literature differs from narratives and instructional teaching. Rather than telling people what to think, it focuses on helping them think well. In *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon began by introducing two related themes: hopelessness apart from God and redundancy without God. The first is summarized by the concept of futility (1:1) while the second is represented by "nothing new under the sun" (1:9). With this brief overview, Solomon started fleshing out specific examples by examining the futility of pleasure in today's passage.

# What does the Bible say?

## ***Ecclesiastes 2:1-11***

**<sup>1</sup> I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity.**

**<sup>2</sup> I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?”**

**<sup>3</sup> 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.**

**<sup>4</sup> I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.**

**<sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.**

**<sup>6</sup> I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.**

**<sup>7</sup> 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.**

**<sup>8</sup> 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.**

**<sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.**

**<sup>10</sup> 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.**

**<sup>11</sup> 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.**

# GET INTO THE STUDY



10 minutes

Notes



**DISCUSS:** Question #1 on page 21 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “If money were no object, what would you buy just for the fun of it?” Allow time for each person to respond.

**ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL):** In advance, ask a few members to bring some diverse breakfast foods to share at the beginning of class. Invite comments about how delicious the food was. Make the point that good food often brings us pleasure,

which is not a bad thing in itself. Ask members to identify other things that give us pleasure. Write the answers on a white board. Ask the group to number the items from least to greatest in terms of how long they bring us joy.

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 22 of the PSG. Introduce the true source of lasting joy by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to “The Point” on page 22 of the PSG: “Pleasures and possessions don’t offer lasting joy.”

**LEADER PACK:** Refer to **Pack Item 2**, the “Solomon” handout. Remind group members that if pleasures and possessions could have brought lasting joy, Solomon would have been the most joyful man on earth.

**PRAY:** Transition into the study by asking the Lord for wisdom to pursue lasting joy. Thank Him for being the Source of all that we could ever need or hope for.





# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

### ***Ecclesiastes 2:1-3***

***<sup>1</sup> I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup> I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" <sup>3</sup> 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.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 on page 23 of the PSG.

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to explain what Solomon means by "pleasure."

**DISCUSS: Question #2** on page 23 of the PSG: **"What priority should a person give to recreation and fun?"**

**SUMMARIZE:** Solomon mentioned two areas of pleasure he investigated. Highlight the main points from page 24 of the PSG.

- ▶ **Laughter.** Sometimes we try to overcome awkward situations with laughter. We may even hope to overcome grief with laughter, but "Even in laughter the heart may ache" (Prov. 14:13). Laughter is no indication of real joy. Solomon discovered that pleasure and laughter fall short.
- ▶ **Alcohol.** Solomon discovered the use of wine did not bring fulfillment. Solomon was not talking about drunkenness. He drank wine but apparently without allowing himself to become intoxicated. He was very careful here. "I searched with my heart . . . my heart still guiding me with wisdom." Solomon wanted to discover if using alcohol was "what was good for the children of man to do under heaven" during their short lives.

**TRANSITION:** Pleasure for pleasure's sake accomplishes nothing, and instead fills our lives with everything except what matters.

**ALTERNATE QUESTION:**

How does our culture encourage the pursuit of pleasure in unhealthy ways?

## ***Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 Commentary***

**[Verse 1]** The Hebrew word for **pleasure** could also be translated “happiness,” “gladness,” or “enjoyment.” It indicates something that makes life better. The frequent use of “**I**” reminds readers Solomon was not studying these topics from books; he was jumping in with both feet—all with a goal of finding out if those luxuries could bring contentment and purpose. As king, Solomon had the wealth and resources to experiment with almost any pleasure imaginable. By filtering things through wisdom, he was able to maintain a healthy perspective and avoid falling into the larger trap he had seen in others. In the final analysis, though, Solomon found such things were not as fulfilling as he had hoped. Pursuing pleasure for the sake of pleasure provided no meaning or purpose. Again, he used the word **vanity** to describe the uselessness of his experiences.

**[Verse 2]** Solomon’s search for pleasure included a fair amount of **laughter**. Instead of being a great medicine, He compared it to the ravings of a lunatic. Later he compared laughter to sticks used for kindling a fire (Eccl. 7:6). It was just another sign of madness in a world turned upside down. If laughter had no purpose, Solomon concluded, pleasure is useless as well. By asking, “**What use is it?**” he basically answered his own rhetorical question. Pleasure alone has no meaning and provides no benefit. Certainly laughter is a wonderful thing. Science has found that laughter produces a variety of physical and emotional benefits. But since God is the ultimate Author of joy and pleasure, those benefits are hollow without Him. Trusting pleasure to provide meaning and purpose can have devastating results. Solomon never intended to paint laughter and pleasure as evil. It’s great to have fun. But humans need God to make laughter worthwhile and to find genuine purpose in the pleasures He provides. When He is not in the picture, futility takes over.

**[Verse 3]** Solomon experimented with **wine** as part of his search for meaning and purpose. While Solomon knew wine would affect his senses, he understood alcohol has an addictive nature that can take over a person’s life. He determined to make sure his mind was still governed by **wisdom** lest he fall into folly. He sought pleasure, not a wild, unrestrained existence. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon mentioned many things he thought might provide satisfaction. However, this is the only time he hinted walking a line of dangerous behavior. The word for **folly** refers to practicing self-indulgence. Solomon worked hard at enjoying himself. But his unwillingness to lose control proved the futility of the experiment. Solomon practiced moderation, maintained his senses, and still found no purpose or meaning in wine. Instead of easing the pain of life, alcohol often creates more pain. The Teacher found that pleasure through self-indulgence still leaves one feeling empty. God provides good things for our pleasure and for His glory. But when those things are twisted, they leave us feeling empty and rob us of our God-given peace.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## NOTES

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### **Ecclesiastes 2:4-8**

***<sup>4</sup> I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 2:4-8 on page 24 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** Question #3 on page 24 of the PSG: **“When is enough, enough?”**

#### **ALTERNATE QUESTION:**

What past accomplishments are now meaningless to you?

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity, “Pleasure . . . for a Season” on page 25 of the PSG to help them see how pleasure falls short of bringing satisfaction to our lives.



*People who experience empty lives often grasp for pleasure through inadequate, sinful means. Circle some of the ways you’ve observed that people use to seek pleasure. [PSG lists several options.] Then answer the questions.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 26 of the PSG. Solomon probed meaning in four areas.

1. **Building projects.**
2. **Accumulating wealth.**
3. **Patronizing the arts.**
4. **Indulging himself sexually.**

**TRANSITION:** In the next verses, we learn that pleasures and possessions may feel like a reward for our work, but it is a reward that doesn’t last.

## **Ecclesiastes 2:4-8 Commentary**

**[Verse 4]** Physical pleasure was Solomon's next avenue for finding meaning in life. He wanted to test finding purpose in possessions. Solomon tried to secure happiness through the things he could create. He **made great works**. The phrase also could mean Solomon expanded his activities. He **built houses and planted vineyards**. Scripture points out examples of his construction work (1 Kings 6:1-38; 7:1-8). Solomon frequently reflected the object of all his efforts—they were for himself. The experiment was never about improving the lives of others. It was another selfish attempt to find purpose apart from God.

**[Verses 5-6]** Solomon also tried his hand at growing things. He **made myself gardens and parks**, but again, only for himself. He indulged his personal pleasure instead of sharing with others. In addition to trees and gardens, Solomon created an impressive system for watering his plants. He built **pools** (again for himself) to irrigate his property. The feat would have taken a great deal of knowledge and skill. To the best of his ability, the king tried to recreate Eden, all in an attempt to find purpose in possessions. But Solomon's attempts only left him feeling more and more empty. We experience the same frustration when we put more stock in the creation than in the Creator. The things that are made can never replace the One who made them.

**[Verse 7]** While Solomon provided the "brains" for these projects, he apparently did not do much of the physical labor. That's because he acquired **male and female slaves** as well as other **slaves** to work for him. These individuals represented a continued expansion of his personal possessions, another "asset" to be counted, along with his construction projects, his vineyards, and his parks. **Herds and flocks** provided another standard for wealth included in his financial balance sheet. He owned a vast collection of livestock—more than anyone ever had in Jerusalem. Many of the servants and slaves mentioned earlier may have been responsible for taking care of these animals. Solomon was not against building wealth. But he reminded us of the dangers from building it for the wrong reasons—it never provides satisfaction in and of itself.

**[Verse 8]** Finally, the Teacher turned to the topic of money. While he had not denied himself any material pleasure, he also gained a fortune as part of his search for meaning. The comment about **silver and gold** reminds readers of the historian's description of Jerusalem during Solomon's reign. At one point, Solomon was taking in around 25 tons of gold each year, while silver was compared to stones abundant in the area (1 Kings 10:14,27). He also spared no expense when it came to entertainment. Along with the music of singers, Solomon gathered a harem of concubines to satisfy his physical appetites. Indeed, Scripture tells us that the king ended up with 700 wives and 300 concubines (11:3). In the final evaluation, Solomon had tried it all. He held nothing back, but nothing provided meaning. The more he acquired, the more he ended up wanting. Instead of discovering what really mattered in life, he felt as lost as ever.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

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### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What are the dangers of developing an entitlement mentality in regard to our achievements?

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## Ecclesiastes 2:9-11

***<sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 2:9-11 on page 26 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS: Question #4** on page 27 of the PSG: **“How would you summarize Solomon’s teaching on pleasures and possessions?”**

**GUIDE:** Use the Commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to describe how all of Solomon’s pursuits of pleasure and possessions amounted to nothing in the end.

**RECAP:** In spite of his pursuit of pleasure, Solomon couldn’t escape “toil.” Because we’re sinners in a sinful world, we’ll never escape toil in this present life. Solomon justified his pursuit of pleasure as something he deserved, but this “reward” proved to be no reward at all.

**DISCUSS: Question #5** on page 27 of the PSG: **“How can our group help one another maintain a proper perspective on pleasures and possessions?”**

**GUIDE:** Refer back to **“The Point”** for this session: **“Pleasures and possessions don’t offer lasting joy.”**



## Ecclesiastes 2:9-11 Commentary

**[Verse 9]** After describing everything he had achieved and acquired, Solomon summarized the results of this part of his experiment. Not surprisingly, he still had nothing meaningful to show for it. Solomon had become **great**. This reflected both his wealth and his influence. However, it also emphasizes the futility of trying to find meaning in things alone. If the richest and most powerful man around could not buy happiness and contentment, no one could. What was true then continues to be true today. The king continued to filter all his observations through his **wisdom**. While he experimented with a variety of things that could have taken control of his life, he avoided that pitfall. Since he continued to maintain self-control and enjoy his possessions without going off the deep end, the absence of purpose stands out. At the same time, maintaining his wisdom allowed the king to logically examine and evaluate what he hoped would provide meaning and purpose. As he would reveal later in the passage, even the cool, rational study failed to produce anything of lasting value. Moderation provides no more satisfaction than excess.

**[Verse 10]** The Teacher again recounted how he refused to hold back on anything that might bring fulfillment. He did not deny himself any potential pleasure, whether physical, material, or financial. He saw the stuff as a just reward for his **toil**. This is likely a reference to the labor he exerted through his experiments. In contemporary terms, he felt he had earned the right to live a little. He deserved to have some fun and relax. But while readers still haven't heard Solomon's final conclusion, his words certainly hint that his efforts fell short of his goals. Money never buys happiness; wealth never provides purpose.

**[Verse 11]** The final analysis brought Solomon right back to his earlier futility. As he considered all he had done and purchased, none of it seemed to matter. When he looked at all his projects and the energy he expended chasing pleasures, he was no better off than when he started. Everything was still **vanity**. Still a **striving after wind**. He had found **nothing to be gained under the sun**. Time has proven him right. Even his great temple—the physical legacy of his reign as king—disappeared in a relatively short amount of time. The Babylonians destroyed it in 587-586 BC—less than 500 years after it was built. After much trial and error, Solomon had discovered a truth that John articulated in his first epistle. He said that the world, with all its pleasures, was passing away (1 John 2:17). All the toys eventually break, and all the shine eventually fades. Human beings never find purpose in their stuff. However, John also provided a ray of hope in the middle of our hopelessness. Those who commit their hearts to God and follow Him completely will find solid footing. They will discover security in something—in Someone—permanent. In his own way, Solomon was making the same argument. Because of the fleeting nature of wealth and possessions, humans can only find meaning by letting God be the center of all they do.

Read the article "The Significance of Royal Gardens" in the Spring 2019 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles such as "Acquiring Wealth in the Ancient Near East" (Summer 2013) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.

