



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Spring No Expense (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11)

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I'm sure there are many times that you feel as if few people can really identify with what you go through. Government officials face unique pressures and struggles that constituents cannot or will not try to understand. You have been elected or you work for someone elected and by and large, your constituency is your theoretical "boss". For that reason, they may not even care about your particular situation or the differing voices clamoring for your attention and agreement. Your power puts you in a special position that most will never experience or appreciate.

That's why Ecclesiastes should encourage your heart. Written by a political leader, the wisdom contained here is unsurpassed and you can rest assured that the author is familiar with the difficulties of public service. Even though Solomon was a king with absolute powers and extravagant wealth, he can be trusted as one who understood the pitfalls of leadership. Giving attention to his words is wise.

Last time we discussed an introduction to the book and considered the first chapter. We saw that Solomon keenly observed the world around him and concluded that the promises this world makes cannot fulfill the human desire for satisfaction. In chapter two, Solomon expands on his personal experiences and shows us what life is like when there is literally no limit to grasping all the world can provide.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 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.

I. PLEASURE (2:1, 2)

We are all created with the innate desire for pleasure. What brings pleasure will vary from person to person, but all humans have pleasure-seeking in common. Depending on one's economic status, the pleasures can be very elaborate or very simple. Solomon had more resources available to him than anyone in his day, so when he says that he would prove the virtues of pleasures to himself, he had no limits.

Solomon sought all of the finest the world could offer that would make him happy. Seven hundred wives, three hundred concubines, gold, clothes, entertainment – whatever can be imagined that was available at that time – were brought at the snap of Solomon's fingers. It's hard to read this passage and not think of the things we would want to satisfy our desires today. But we have limits Solomon did not have.

That is why it's so surprising that he makes the statement that all this pleasure brought a deep sense of emptiness. Laughter didn't last for him. Pleasure passed away from him. Friends disappointed him. It calls to mind the decision Moses made to follow God, even with trials, and not the ease of palace life in Egypt.

Hebrews 11:24-26 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

The things of this world are not necessarily sinful in themselves, but when they become a hedonistic idol, sin is present. According to Solomon and this passage in Hebrews, pleasure as an end in itself pursued only in the world is fleeting and cannot bring true, lasting satisfaction.

II. PARTIES (2:3)

Solomon partied. He had the finest wine and drank as much as he wanted. This was still part of his "pleasure experiment", still trying to prove that lasting fulfillment could be found. We live in a culture in which many try to find happiness the same way. While the Scriptures do not call drinking alcohol a sin, there are ample warnings about its effects.

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Proverbs 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

Ephesians 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

The partying lifestyle can only bring momentary pleasure. Not only will it not last, but letting it control you can lead to a multitude of other problems. The political sphere offers alcohol in abundance. Live wisely and avoid drunkenness.

III. PROJECTS (2:4A)

In verse four Solomon lists more accomplishments. His resources allowed him to draw up ornate plans for renovation and expansion on a grand scale. These projects included houses and other massive buildings to display his greatness. In his pursuit of fulfillment, he took a few moments of pleasure, but then one can visualize Solomon walking alone through these fancy buildings, wondering why they didn't satisfy his deepest longings.

IV. PARKS (2:4B, 5)

When Solomon refers to gardens, they can't be associated with community parks or botanical gardens we see in America. The Hebrew word for gardens is "paradises", and we can only imagine the opulence Solomon could conjure in his mind as he designed these enormous, walled-in areas for pleasing the senses.

From chapter one, we've already noticed Solomon's familiarity with the natural world and science when he mentions the sun, wind and water cycle. Botany for him was a pleasurable diversion, but again, could not provide lasting joy.

V. POOLS (2:6)

To water his huge building projects, vineyards and gardens, Solomon devised immense irrigation systems. Three of these reservoirs are still known to exist, called Solomon's cisterns, a mile and a half from Jerusalem. This reminds us that not only could Solomon deliver the goods with what he built, but he also had no problem having the needed assets to maintain it all.

VI. PEOPLE (2:7)

To get all of this accomplished, Solomon needed man-power. The servants he bought and employed built and maintained his vast holdings. What kind of staff did he need? It must have been impressive, but even in the satisfaction of having all the human help he required, the king still could not find the key to fulfillment.

VII. POSSESSIONS (2:8)

Verse eight gives a closer glimpse into the personal possessions of Solomon. His legendary wealth is described elsewhere in the Bible.

1 Kings 10:23, 25, 27a Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. . . Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. . . And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone. . .

VIII. PRESTIGE (2:9)

It's not arrogant of Solomon to call himself great. He was. His fame spread through many nations and his wealth and wisdom drew other leaders to him. He married their daughters (which caused other problems later) and collected their tribute. He held the height of power in the known world at that time.

Clearly the pitfall of seeking satisfaction in power is dangerous for a politician. It can be gained by appropriate means or not, but if the experience of Solomon tells us anything it is that momentary power and prestige cannot fill the void in the human heart.

IX. PURPOSELESSNESS (2:10, 11)

This section ends leaving the reader feeling the despair of Solomon. After the years of work, accolades and accomplishments, he simply cannot say that he found true joy. Life was still empty, as he wrote in chapter one – a chasing of the wind, something that slips through the fingers as soon as it seems firmly grasped.

Temporal things are just that – temporary. Giving our lives to pursue that which is fleeting is a waste of our earthly existence. More wealth, power or pleasure will never be enough. We must learn from Solomon's wisdom and find his answer to the dilemma found later in Ecclesiastes.