

True Enjoyment Even In This Life

Eccl 1:12-2:26 (text)

13 January 2019, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

In the previous passage, the Teacher's message was that: in life under the sun (i.e. in life on earth without God), there is no lasting gain – it's all futile (1:3)!

But now, this exceedingly wise teacher wants to do a test – yes, an experiment; in fact, he's going to do *three* experiments!

What for?

Well, to see if there's not perhaps, after all, something to gain (something more substantial; some meaningful joy) in a life under the sun/heaven – yes, even in a life without God!

Well, here are the three areas (or *parts*, if you like) of life which the teacher will examine – and they're also the three points of our sermon...

- Pleasure
- Wisdom
- Possessions

Pleasure (Self-Indulgence)

In Eccl 2:1, we read that the teacher tests out pleasure – pleasure *under the sun*² (i.e. pleasure without God)!

And instantly, this is what he says of such pleasure: it is vanity/futile; yes, like a breath which you can't hold onto – it's no gain! Indeed, “What does it accomplish?”³ says he (2:2)!

Nevertheless, he then went and tested out *several kinds* of pleasures.

¹ I'm greatly indebted to the wonderful exegetical work and great guidance provided by GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2010. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : William B Eerdmans. pp. 30-47

² Cf. Eccl. 1:13-14 for the fact that the teacher's tests will be done *under the sun/heaven*, “*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.*”¹⁴ *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*”

³ Literally, “And of pleasure – what is this doing?” *על שְׁמַךְ מִה־זֶה עֲשָׂה*

The first one is *laughter!* Soon he discovered that laughter apart from God, is futile!

Then, the teacher experimented with the next pleasure, i.e. *wine* – but in such a way, that he didn't drink himself drunk; no, he just wanted to cheer himself, for, says he in v.3, ***my heart was still guiding me with wisdom.***

But even wine in itself (i.e. wine which is sipped apart from God), didn't give him lasting gain (lasting joy)!

So, next, he sought pleasure in *building projects!* Yes, he built for himself houses; planted vineyards; made gardens and parks filled with a variety of trees! He made for himself some pools so that he could water his lush gardens! So, indeed, he created paradise⁴ for himself!

And we should notice the words, “for myself.” He repeats it three times in only two verses! Well, that's nothing less than self-indulgence, i.e. pleasure apart from God!

My brother & sister, I have a niece. She's young – only thirty years old. She earns big money. Although she grew up in a church-going family, now, at the moment, God is not “on her radar!” She lives from one pleasure to another and, sadly, also from one man to another.

What can one say about such a soul?

Well, is it not this: that such soul is a restless soul – a soul without peace? Why is there no lasting peace in her soul? Well, because God is not there. There's a restless void which she now tries to fill with somethings which she *thinks* will still that hunger. Yet, every new dress she buys loses its fancy after a while. Then she simply buys again! Every overseas trip has a thrill that wears off and needs to followed up by another trip. Every man in her life lasts only two to three years, then he is replaced.

Young people, see the lifestyle of a pleasure-seeker?

Anyway, still busy with the experiment of pleasure under the sun, what's the teacher of our text doing next?

⁴ That's the Hebrew word translated in v. 5 as “parks” – *pardes* (פָּרֶדֶס) **preserve, park** (loan-word from Zend *pairi-daēza*, *enclosure*... Kurd. *parêṣ* hence Armenian *partēz*... late Assyrian *pardīsu*... Arabic فَرْدَسٌ (*firdawsun*); Gk. παράδεισος (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 825). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Well, next, he got for himself lots of slaves to serve him (2:7). And he got for himself more cattle & sheep (2:7); yes, more than anyone who ruled before him in Jerusalem (talking as Solomon the wise & rich ruler).

He also collected silver & gold from kings from other provinces (2:8)!

He sought pleasure in the art of music – with singers & musicians (2:8)!

He got for himself lots of concubines and delighted in the joys of immorality (2:8)!

Yes, in this teacher's experiment with pleasure, he left no stone untouched! Everything his eyes & heart desired, he enjoyed (2:10)!

He had more pleasures than any king before him (2:9)!

So, what do we see?

Well, that already after experiment number 1, the teacher has found the answer to the question he asked in chapter 1:3. Remember that question (we had it last Sunday)? ***What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*** (ESV).

Well, now, in chapter 2 verse 11, the teacher gives the answer, i.e. ***nothing – there was nothing to be gained under the sun (apart from God)!***

So, that was the result of his first experiment.

So, that brings us now to this teacher's second experiment, which is our point 2...

Wisdom

Again, as before, we see this teacher speaking as if he is King Solomon – i.e. the wisest man who ever lived.

So, what test is he going to do now?

Well, he's going to compare wisdom (cleverness)⁵ with foolishness and then see whether there's anything lasting to gain for a wise man who lives apart from God – yes, a wise/clever man who lives *as if death is the end*; as if there's no life after death!

So, what does he see straightaway?

⁵ This is also the meaning of the Hebrew word **חַכּוֹת** skill, wisdom, shrewdness, prudence (cf. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 315). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Well, he sees that there's a difference between a wise man and a fool.

How? Well, in that the wise man ***has eyes in his head while the fool walks in darkness*** (Eccl 2:14). In other words, the fool goes through life in the same way as a blind person walks – stumbling and falling.⁶ Yes, the fool keeps on making many stupid mistakes through life, whereas the wise man's wisdom avoids him many pitfalls! The wise man makes the right choices in business and finance.⁷

So, what does the teacher's experiment show him? Aha, there's some bright light shining under the sun (apart from God) – in at least one way, wisdom is better than foolishness: in this life (under the sun) it gives its “owner” a better life than the life of the fool.

But alas, in the end, in a life apart from God, when death comes, game's over! How does the clever man's cleverness help him now? Yes, what gain does the dead clever man have over the dead fool? If they both lived merely under-the-sun lives, then they're both equal now! Now, the clever man has nothing to show for having lived wisely!

What's more, long after their deaths, even the name of the wise will be forgotten, just as the name of the fool!

No wonder the teacher says (in Eccl 2:15), ***“Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise (clever)?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity (futile/no gain).***

My brother & sister, last Sunday, in the morning sermon, I told you about my dear friend – that great businessman: tyre dealer; radio-soapie writer; maker of TV ads and TV programmes. Well, in many

⁶ Cf, also Prov 3:21-23 (especially v.23), ***My son, do not lose sight of these— keep sound wisdom and discretion,***²² ***and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck.*** ²³ ***Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble.***

Also cf. Prov 4:18-19 ***But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.*** ¹⁹ ***The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.***

⁷ That the Teacher sees wisdom here as wisdom re finances/money, is seen e.g. in Eccl 2:18-19 where he is sad that he who has been wise (gained lots of possessions), no has to leave his possessions behind when he dies. And who knows whether the man who gets all his hard-earned possessions will not perhaps be a fool (not knowing how to work wisely with money & possessions): ***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***

ways, he was a wise man – wise re many things in life: money-making, politics, and many other things. But because he had rejected Jesus Christ, he practised his wisdom in an under the sun way (i.e. apart from God). Then he died!

My question now is the same as that of the teacher: what lasting gain⁸ does my friend have now from his wisdom/cleverness under the sun?

How is his status now different from that of the dead man who, in life, constantly made foolish & unwise decisions?

What lasting help was my friend's under-the-sun wisdom to him?

Where he is now, it has given him no gain!

So, the teacher of Ecclesiastes is right – even wisdom, when practised apart from God (earthly wisdom), is futile!

What else does the wise teacher say at the end of this experiment?

Well, he says (in Eccl 1:18), that with much wisdom/cleverness comes much frustration! Why? Because, death equalises the wise/clever man and the fool! Says he (in Eccl 2:17), “*So, I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind!*”

Indeed, there is no lasting gain (joy); yes, not even in an under-the-sun *wisdom*!

So, that brings us now to this teacher's third experiment, which is our point 3...

Possessions

Well, straightaway, the teacher comes to the conclusion that lasting gain (joy) also does not lie in earthly possessions.

How come?

Well, again (as we saw re wisdom), when we die, we can't take our possessions with us. Naked did we come into this world, and naked we will leave it. Not even our graveclothes can cover us eternally!

Indeed, dead Bill Gates will look much the same as the dead Dalit (that poor untouchable) of India!

So, what does the wise/wealthy teacher say?

Well, now that I ‘click’ that all my wealth (money & possessions) which I have worked for so hard all my life, will go to someone who might deal foolishly with it – now, I start hating & regretting all my

⁸ A gain which surpasses death

hard work! Just think of it! A fool will be **master**⁹ (will rule and be lord) over all that I have toiled for (2:19)!

My brother & sister, I still vividly remember how, in my high-school years, my uncle and aunt wasted the farm which they inherited from my Oupa (*grandfather*).¹⁰ And, like the teacher of our text, my Oupa did work very hard on that farm – yes, in the hot African summer sun where 38° Celsius was the norm!

I think I once told you how, within about seven years after Oupa's death (Ouma was still alive), that farm had to be sold on auction. Clearly, my uncle was not a farmer. Neither did it help that he was married to a city girl who hated the hard-working lifestyle so absolutely vital to farm-life!

And so, when my Oupa died, his hard-earned assets were transferred to people who handled it in a very foolish manner!

My brother & sister, clearly (from the rest of his book), the teacher knows there is gain *after* this life – and *that* for the person who lived his life on earth not in an under-the-sun way, but for the one who lived in acknowledgement, praise & honour of God! And you & I know this truth even better, i.e. that through Jesus Christ (the Son of God) there is eternal gain for us in life *after* death!

But that was not the question that the teacher asked in our text. That was not why he did these three experiments!

No, remember, he tested for something else! He wanted to see whether there's anything lasting to gain even in *this* life, before you die?

The conclusion that he came to is a clear “No!” “There is no lasting gain!” It's all vanity; yes, but a breath on which you have no hold. And no human being can change that!¹¹

⁹ Qal Imperfect 3rd Person Masculine Singular of I. שָׁלַט ... domineer, be master of (late) (NH id.; Assyrian šalātu, have power; Arabic سَلْطَنٌ (salūṭa) overcome, prevail; سَلِيْطٌ (salīṭun) strong, hard, سُلْطَانٌ (sulṭānun) dominion, also ruler, sultan; Ethiopic መለጥ፡ (šallatā) Aramaic טְלִיט, שְׁלִיט (šlat) (especially der. spec.), Nab. טְלִיטוֹן, שְׁלִיטוֹן—Qal Pf. 3 ms. 'שָׁלַט' Ec 8:9, etc.; Impf. 3 ms. טְלִיט Ec 2:19, etc.; Inf. cstr. טְלִיטוֹן Est 9:1;—domineer, lord it over, עַל pers., Ne 5:15; בְּ לִרְעָל (lər'āl) pers. Ec 8:9; בְּ rei 2:19; become master of, pers. Est 9:1 (Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 1020). Oxford: Clarendon Press).

¹⁰ Oupa is Afrikaans for grandfather/granddad.

¹¹ Yes, as he says (in Eccl 1:15), “**What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.**”

So, what do we see?

Well, that the teacher got a “no” answer to all three his experiments! He discovered that lasting joy is...

- not found in under-the-sun *pleasures*
- neither in under-the-sun *wisdom* (mere clever minds)
- nor in our earthly *possessions*

So, is there then no substance to this life? Is there then no deep-rooted, time-superseding gain/joy anywhere in this life to be found? O yes, there is, says the teacher, there is!

But where?

My brother & sister, surprise!

You know what? This time-superseding joy sits in all three areas which the ecclesiast has just examined! Yes, this joy is there in all three! But it's hidden in some way!

You see, there is time-superseding joy 1) in all life's pleasures, 2) in wisdom, and 3) in possessions, if – and only if – *you receive all these with heartfelt thanks as gifts from God, using them on His terms and for His glory!*

So, here then is the teacher's main message in our text – also the main message of this sermon: **“Dear reader (Dear Wainui Church Member & Visitor), since all worldly endeavours are futile, find enjoyment in God's daily gifts of food, drink, and work! And thank God for these!”**

Yes, in Eccl 2:24-26, the teacher says as much as this...There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his hard work! This enjoyment is from the hand of God, for apart from God, who can have that time-superseding enjoyment his food, drink and hard work!? For to the one who pleases God – yes to the one who honours God by being grateful for

Yes, all the teacher's wise experiments & research efforts cannot make straight what is crooked. Indeed, later in this book (in Eccl 7:13), the teacher will say again, **“Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?”**

You see, after the Fall, God cursed the ground so that it would give thorns & thistles (Gn 3:17-18) – but not just thorns & thistles; no, also *hurricanes, winter-flu and cancer!*

And did not the Apostle Paul speak of the groaning of creation, and that **“creation was subjected to futility/vanity,”¹¹** and that we can only have a firm hope with Paul that someday **“the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay”** (Rm 8:20-21).

God's gifts – God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. But as for the sinner – the one who misses the mark by not acknowledging God – God has given him over to his selfish & toilsome gathering and heaping, while God gives peace & enjoyment to His loved ones in their sleep (Ps 127:2).¹²

My brother & sister, the teacher's message is that, rather than craving for pleasures we might have one day when we're in a more likeable job or when we're retired, we should, in gratitude to God, enjoy our *present* eating; our present drinking; and our present work, for these are God's gifts to us.

Don't get sucked into consumerism! Yes, why crave for a new cellphone if there's nothing wrong with your current one – its gigabytes are enough; it's ports still work well; it can do all that you need it to do. So, why buy a new one just for its better looks!?

Husbands & wives, why shall we quietly long for the person we never married, thinking that it would be better to be married to another person? Well, that just robs your marriage from power & love! Why not look again at your God-given other half and be content – yes, see how precious she/he is!?

Our Lord Jesus, too, teaches against chasing & worrying after bigger & better, and that we should rather savour God's gifts in the here & now! Did He not say, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink... Look how your Heavenly Father feeds the birds!”?¹³

The Apostle Paul says, “***And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything*** (i.e. also your eating, drinking, your work, your buying, your relationships) ***in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him***” (Col 3:17).

My brother & sister, and young person, enjoy all God's gifts to you! Enjoy them on His terms and for His glory!

I love what one commentator says, “If we do not enjoy God's gifts, we snub God the Giver. But if, with contentment, we enjoy our

¹² Cf. Ps 127:2 *It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.*

¹³ Cf. Mt 6:25-33

(spouses), possessions, food and drink and work (thanking God for these), God will be pleased. Enjoy God's gifts every day!"¹⁴

And do you know who will be in the best position to enjoy all these earthly gifts God has given us?

Only he/she who is totally blown away (stunned) by God's greatest Gift to mankind – His Son, Jesus Christ!

If you have received Him, then that restless, pleasure-chasing void in your heart has been filled, and you praise & thank God at best!

AMEN (2,490 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁴ Greidanus (ibid:68) (Parenthesis mine).