

# The Search for Satisfaction

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Solomon begins Ecclesiastes saying that human toil delivers no lasting gain on the earth (v. 3). Now he describes how he came to that conclusion. He touched, tasted, felt, heard, sung, built, acquired and excelled more than all who were in Jerusalem before him (and since). Even wisdom, apart from the gift of God, will not avail in the search for satisfaction.

## Crooked Not Made Straight

Solomon set out, using wisdom, to understand all that is done under heaven, the burdensome or “evil task” God has given to the sons of man, (“sons of Adam” vv. 12-13). He doesn’t say that the heavy affliction is unknown to the Lord or given apart from His will. It’s God Himself who pronounces curse on mankind at the fall, and it continues to every descendant of Adam (Gen. 3:17-19). We are burdened creatures whose work is frustrated by thorns and our own fatigue. Solomon recognizes that everything done under the sun as *hevel*, vapor, an attempt to shepherd the wind, which is worse than herding cats (v. 14). The crooked things can’t be straightened, and the things lacking are innumerable (v. 15). You can’t begin to list all broken things in your life and the lives, families, organizations, businesses, and institutions around you. Most people ignore the things they actually can change and spend most of their time complaining about the things they can’t. Most Christians stay away from verses like these, but we should listen. God burdens us and makes things crooked. If there’s a disaster in the city, didn’t He do it (Amos 3:6)? Adam and Eve were given dominion over the world (Gen. 1:28). Discontent with all of God’s blessings, they grasped for the one thing they couldn’t have yet, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). Rather than become like God, they brought toil and hardship into the world. Some will try to opt out of these frustrating circumstances by understanding them. Solomon was the highest of intellectuals, excelling more than anyone before him. He studied to grasp madness and folly, but it didn’t help. This too was grasping for the wind (v. 17). He gained wisdom and knowledge about the world, but along with it came grief and sorrow at how it all works (v. 18). More education about a crooked world does not bring happiness.

## Chasing Pleasure

So he turned to pleasure. Could he find satisfaction in his heart by maximizing enjoyment? Alas, more vanity (2:1). He tried laughter and mirth, and discovered pointlessness and meaninglessness (v. 2). Watch our late night comics and see how cynical, weirdly political, and unfunny they are all the time. Next up, wine. After all, the Lord made wine to gladden the heart of man (Ps. 104:15). Can’t we find it there whether we have Him or not? Solomon says he did this with wisdom, meaning he didn’t drink himself to death. He was seeking satisfaction, not oblivion (v. 3). But the bottle didn’t deliver. Looking at the vanity and trouble of this world apart from the gift of God makes people want to escape by beverage or substance. Paul makes the same argument, that if Christ didn’t rise from the dead, we should eat, drink and be (momentarily) merry because tomorrow we die (1 Cor. 15:32). Hedonism is despair, the sensuous flailing of those without hope. And it doesn’t work. The physical hangover is nothing compared to the sorrow and regret that follow. When a friend or city or county or state permits these enslaving behaviors, it reveals hopelessness and ultimately hatred for the person, though usually disguised as pity and compassion. Solomon also sought aesthetic and cultural achievements. He built houses, planted vineyards, designed gardens and cultivated orchards with all kinds of fruit trees (vv. 4-5). He engineered water pools and water features to keep everything green, and acquired servants to maintain his bountiful herds and flocks (vv. 6-7). His daily

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provisions were enormous, enough to feed tens of thousands of people, and he brought peace and joy to everyone (1 Kgs. 4:22, 24-25). He gathered treasures, silver and gold, and filled the city with music, both choral and instrumental, and did all of it with skill and intelligence (vv. 8-9). He did not withhold himself from any pleasure, but sought fulfillment in every way only to find that nothing tasted, nothing quenched, nothing ultimately satisfied. Here is a man who couldn't spend all the money he had, with all of the time, materials, resources, power, and intelligence to experience everything he could desire. Looking back on everything, he despaired: "And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun" (v. 11).

## Earthly Wisdom

It would be easy to conclude that wisdom makes no difference in any way. Solomon steps back to consider. Even though he can only repeat what the guy did before him and his do the same, wisdom beats folly like light does darkness. Both occupy the same room, but the wise man can see where he is going while the fool stumbles around (vv. 12-14). Still, the same thing can and will happen to both, wisdom not withstanding (v. 15). They both die and are forgotten (v. 16). Which one was wise again? We forget. The wise man has more to be concerned about, and this stresses Solomon out. Who will inherit his stuff (vv. 17-18)? Save money, make smart investments, build a great company so a bevy of fools in the bank, market, government, management, board, and family can unwisely squander and undo all you did (vv. 18-19). Very discouraging (v. 20). If that's what you work for, it's vaporous and sad; he spent a lot of sleepless nights chasing this smoke (v. 23).

## The Gift of God

Why does God put this burdensome toil on us and make us live in a crooked world that can't be made straight? What would we do without it? We would forget Him completely. Why can't we find satisfaction in all of these desires and blessings in the world? What do we conclude about appetites that don't seem to fulfill the greater satisfaction we earnestly desire? C.S. Lewis said, "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." We were made for a world filled by the Spirit of God, the kind of world that Jesus' death and resurrection brings back to life. Apart from the gift of God, this world is nothing but vapor. But through the gift of God, "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor" (v. 24). He gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to His people (v. 26). Others may have all the things Solomon had, but no ability to thank Him, truly enjoy it, and be satisfied. Those who won't thank Him and receive blessings from His hand store it up for those who are right before God (v. 26). Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and everything else is given to you to receive with a grateful heart (Matt. 6:33).