Pastor David M. Choi

**Pointless: The Problem of Pleasure**

Introduction:

For our inward nights this semester, we’ll be taking a break from the New Testament by turning our attention to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The author of Ecclesiastes calls himself Qoheleth, which means *Preacher*. And he starts out by saying what? “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” Here are some other translations: “Meaningless, meaningless. All is meaningless” (NIV); “Smoke, nothing but smoke… it’s all smoke” (Message); “Nothing is worthwhile; everything is futile” (Living Bible).

In other words, the Preacher says all of life, and everything that takes place inside of it, is utterly pointless. This is how a book in the bible starts! And it confounds us because this doesn’t sound like a typical book in the bible, nor does it seem appropriate that a biblical book starts out like this. But it does. You see, it’s a story about a man on a quest who is trying to figure out the meaning of life. “The ironic thing is that this man calls himself preacher, but this preacher actually has more questions than answers.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What’s going on?

The Preacher is looking at life “under the sun,” and he’s incredibly frustrated because life just doesn’t make sense. To this, Justin Bailey writes, “If the world made sense, people who were good would be rewarded, people who were bad would be punished, people who work hard would enjoy the fruit of their labor, people who live wisely would live much better than those who live foolishly. But he looks at the world and sees that this doesn’t always happen. No matter how you live [in the end] everyone dies.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The preacher is trying to make sense of a world that just doesn’t make sense, and throughout the book he’s searching for three primary things, namely, meaning, fullness, and coherence, that is, for his own life and for the world around him. He’s asking, “Can we find meaning in life simply by living life on its own terms? And can we find something in life that will truly satisfy if we scour this world long enough?”

This book comes to us at an opportune time, because we too have more questions about life than answers. We are riddled with anxiety because everything seems so backwards and pointless. We ask ourselves, “With all that’s going on in the world, what will it really amount to in the end? And what really is the meaning of *my* life?” During this *Pointless* series, we’ll be walking alongside the Preacher in order to tackle these challenging issues, and to really grapple with the restlessness within our own hearts.

Today, we’ll be looking at pleasure, and we’ll consider what the Preacher has to say about pleasure as he begins by looking for meaning there. To do so, we’ll look at it in three stages: (1) pursuit of pleasure; (2) the problem of pleasure; (3) the point of pleasure.

The Pursuit of Pleasure:

The Preacher, as we saw, in chapter one begins by describing his general, life experience as meaningless. For the rest of the book, Qoheleth will be trying to figure out whether or not that’s really the case, that is, by setting up and testing out several hypotheses. In that regard, we should see him as playing the role of a scientist.

So, in chapter two, he sets up his first hypothesis: *I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself”* (2:1). He’s saying maybe the point of life is for me to feel good, and for me to be fulfilled and as happy as I can be. Because Qoheleth is looking for the source of life’s joy, it comes to us as no surprise that he starts with the pursuit of pleasure. And what we find in this passage is that Qoheleth is incredibly thorough and comprehensive in his pursuit of pleasure; he leaves no stone unturned.

*Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-*8. Here, Qoheleth tries to find pleasure in wine. In addition, he builds for himself a utopia of beautiful houses, adorned with decadent vineyards, gardens, and parks, and pools to water the plants and animals. He has male and female slaves, waiting on him hand and foot. He has herds and livestock, and endless treasures of silver and gold. He had the best musicians and the best singers on his payroll in order to please his ears with music any time he wanted. And he gathers for himself hundreds of concubines to find pleasure in love and romance, in having sex with the most beautiful women any time he wants.

We see that Qoheleth is a man of endless wealth and resources. To draw a modern comparison, he’s like Jeff Bezos, the richest man on earth, who can have literally have anything and everything. Everyday we see anywhere between three and four thousand advertisements, and all day long, from music, social media, sports, entertainment, clothing, etc. we see advertisements. But the common theme behind every advertisement is this: (1) to convince you that you are unhappy; and (2) to convince you that you *can* be happy if you buy this or that product. So, underlying every advertisement is this idea that you are not fulfilled, however, you can be by filling your emptiness with stuff. It’s true, no?

We think if I can get that next best thing, then I’ll be happy. Or, that the reason why I’m still unhappy, even though I might’ve gotten that thing I wanted, is because I still don’t have these other things I want. But for Qoheleth he literally gets *everything* he wants, and possesses everything he thinks will give him pleasure and satisfaction: *And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure…* (2:11) And what does he conclude? That it’s all smoke, that looking for pleasure in all of this stuff was like chasing after wind. He concludes this portion of his pursuit of meaning by saying, “Why did I chase after all this stuff? Why did I do all of this? I got everything I wanted, and yet it meant nothing to me.”

The Problem of Pleasure:

There’s a survey mentioned in a recent article about how satisfied some people are with the amount of wealth they possess, people who we would classify as multi-millionaires. And what the survey found was that these millionaires unanimously expressed that they were not satisfied, even though the they have millions of dollars spread “across their bank accounts, investments, and retirement accounts.” Whereby the writer of the article poignantly asks, “If multimillionaires don’t feel wealthy, then who does?”[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, if the people who we think are supposed to be the happiest says that they’re, in fact, not, then where are we supposed to go to find happiness? Where are we supposed to go to find fullness?

But it’s not just wealth, is it? Because you can find this in almost anything – academics, athletics, or whatever – where people say to you once you get to the top then you will be happy. So, you work hard, you get the grades you want, or the athletic accomplishments, and you’re momentarily satisfied, but afterwards the feeling passes, and you’re left right back where you started.

This experience of getting what we think will make us happy, but then finding out that it leaves us empty, or sometimes even emptier than when we started, is what the Preacher is describing: that obtaining pleasure is like trying to hold onto smoke, it’s like chasing after the wind. Or consider all of this technology that you have.

You’re so connected to people, where you have hundreds of followers on Instagram, and your friends are literally available to you in chat. You can text people at any time, and yet many of you are lonelier than you’ve ever been before. You have all of these apps, and all of these video games to distract you, but when you’re not playing them you’re lonely. You find some happiness while you’re playing videogames or while you’re watching YouTube videos, but as soon as you shut them off you are once again confronted by the reality of your emptiness, which is why so many of you are addicted to your technology.

This is what the Preacher means in 1:8: *All things are full of weariness… the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.* So, how does Qoheleth deal with the problem of pleasure? He says we can do one of two things: first, we can cover our emptiness with laughter as a way to distract ourselves: *I said of laughter, “It is mad”* (2:2); second, we can go in the opposite direction by rejecting life and by concluding that it is not worth living. Qoheleth himself says that if this is all that life is then death is really better than life. He says it would’ve been better to not have been born (4:3).

Have *you* ever thought death would be better than life? Have you ever wished that you had never been born? The Preacher has felt the same way. Did you know suicide is much more contemplated among people who are wealthy than people who are poor? In Europe, the suicide capital is Salzburg, Austria, the birthplace of Mozart, and one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Thus, “there’s this irony that the people who are most poor and destitute struggle for life, while people who are rich and are full reach for death.” Why? Because they’ve experienced all that this world has to offer, and in the end find out that it’s nothing but vapor.

All throughout life, you think this or that (latest gadget, boyfriend/girlfriend, six-figure salary, etc.) will make you happy but you realize that nothing fills. In pleasure, we think we’ll find meaning, but no matter how much we achieve, no matter how much we accomplish, no matter how much we get, nothing is enough.

So, you’re left to answer this question: where will you go? That is, will you laugh at life by distracting yourselves with entertainment? We say, “I feel empty, so I might as well feel okay while I feel empty.” Or, some will move in the other direction and will think about ending one’s life, because I can’t shake this feeling of emptiness I don’t want to distract myself from it anymore, and so I’ll end my life. Obviously, though, we don’t want to go in either route, and obviously neither does the Preacher.

The Purpose of Pleasure:

What are we supposed to do? The Preacher says we are supposed to enjoy life, but enjoy it *how*? We enjoy life as a gift from God.

He’s saying there’s nothing wrong with enjoying life’s pleasures per se, but the reason why our pursuit of certain pleasures often leaves us feeling empty is because we don’t see such pleasures as gifts from God. However, God pours pleasures into our life because it’s one of the ways God communicates himself to us. And so, if God is giving us these gifts to point us to himself, then we shouldn’t expect these gifts to satisfy us, because there’s something beyond the gift, namely, the Giver.

The problem is not pleasure in and of itself; the problem is that we expect pleasure to give us what only *God* can give us. As Justin Bailey once said, “If there is no God, then pleasure is really just a drug to numb us from the emptiness of life. But if God is there, then pleasure is a gift. In the midst of a world that we cannot control, the pleasure that God gives us - good food, good friends, good work, good technology - gives us a glimpse of what the one who is in control is like. Joy points us to God by saying, 'God is like this but better because he *lasts*.’”[[4]](#footnote-4) Through the gifts of pleasure, in other words, God is trying to draw us to the greatest gift, as well as the greatest pleasure, of Himself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Application:

So here’s what we should take away. First, pleasure is God’s idea. Sin is taking God’s gifts at times or in ways that he has forbidden. However, there’s a way to receive a gift that dishonors the gift. Pleasure is good, because remember it is God’s idea; nonetheless, there is appropriate context for pleasure, because experiencing pleasure in the right context fulfills its purpose of pointing us to the Giver himself.

Second, God gives us his gifts to enjoy responsibly. Qoheleth says enjoy life, and live well, but know that you will one day give an account to God for what you did with his gifts. That is, did you use his gifts for his purposes? For his glory? Did you share them, and bless others by them? Or did you worship them, and turn them into idols?

Third, don’t expect gifts to do what they were never meant to do. Everyday joys are great, however, they don’t last and you certainly can’t hold onto them. But that’s okay, since they’re not supposed to last. They’re supposed to point us to the one who does last. Enjoy gifts in their appropriate moments in time. In an empty world, joy does not come by ignoring emptiness, or laughing at life’s emptiness, but by trusting in God who is good and all-satisfying. God doesn’t give us answers, but he does give us himself. A feel good story, entertainment, distractions, all of these things are not enough.

If you feel incomplete, if you feel empty, it’s because you are. And God, by his mercy, has given you himself in Christ so that you would no longer have to be. When you come into relationship with Christ, you are given the gift to see that joy is not found in accumulation of comfort, but in pouring yourself out in glad surrender. It’s found not in trying to feel good, but rather in giving yourself to Christ.

1. Justin Bailey, from a sermon delivered on May 1, 2011 at Antioch Bible Church in Wheeling, Illinois. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joe Pinsker, “Who Actually Feels Satisfied About Money?,” *The Atlantic*, July 21, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/07/who-feels-rich/594439/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Justin Bailey, sermon, May 1, 2011. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)