

# Lifestyle Of The Rich And Restless

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 June 19, 2024

You can fly to Israel and visit the historic Pools of Solomon about 2 miles from Bethlehem. They're an amazing feat of civic engineering. With a capacity of more than 75 million gallons, they fed the aqueducts supplying Jerusalem with water off and on for more than 2,000 years.<sup>1</sup>

Some argue that these pools are not the ones discussed in Ecclesiastes chapter 2, but Josephus said they were, in fact, built by Solomon. Why did he build them? Naturally, Jerusalem needed water. On top of that, tradition states that it was a place where Solomon's many wives would bathe and that the king would pass by the spot while riding in his chariot.

But the *real* reason is in our text. He built it for *himself*. He hoped this project might give him satisfaction. It was one more desperate attempt to discover meaning in his life. A reason for living.

Tonight, we'll see the *many* avenues he took in his pursuit for meaning. We'll see that he lived "the good life" to an extreme no one could ever approximate. But no matter how much he had, how far he went, how good it felt, it was never enough. Day after day he woke up empty and unfulfilled.

**Ecclesiastes 2:1 - I said to myself, "Go ahead, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy what is good." But it turned out to be futile.**

At the start of his experiments, the Teacher tries a variety of personal pleasures. *Personal* is the operative word. Everything we'll read tonight was for *self*. He uses the word "I" 21 times in 11 verses. Not to mention the me's, myself's, and my's. "I said to myself" is the opening phrase.

He decided to live a purely hedonistic lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Self-indulgence. Self-fulfillment. Unrestrained luxury and experience. All the promises made to us on casino billboards, in cruise vacation brochures, and junk mail with the words "one lucky winner..." all those things the Teacher did for himself. And he did it all without even going into debt!

Now, the pleasure pursuits weren't *all* necessarily sinful.<sup>3</sup> The term pleasure can mean simply joy or gladness.<sup>4</sup> But we see that his efforts were physical, temporal, and personal. Under the sun.

As usual, he gives us the bottom line up front: It turned out to be hevel. Smoke. He was *surprised* to find out how hevel a life of pleasure is. Where it says, "but" there, it means, "Behold!"<sup>5</sup> "Take a look at this!" We don't expect this outcome. In fact, we *still* have a hard time believing it today, no matter how many times we're told it's true. We think maybe we know how to beat the system. We don't.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon%27s\\_Pools](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon%27s_Pools)

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

<sup>3</sup> James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

<sup>4</sup> Iain Provan *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

<sup>5</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition: Notes*

**Ecclesiastes 2:2 - <sup>2</sup>I said about laughter, “It is madness,” and about pleasure, “What does this accomplish?”**

They say laughter is the best medicine...but better keep taking your insulin. It's not that the Teacher is against laughter - laughter and whimsy are great things. But can you feed a family with laughs?

You can love a good joke, but imagine if your favorite comedian told a great bit, everyone cracks up, then once the crowd is quiet again, they told the *exact same joke*. No one is going to laugh a second time. We'd be confused because there needs to be a *new* joke. That first laugh is gone.

Man's humor can really help in day-to-day circumstances. We *love* to laugh. But, it cannot solve the basic problems of life.<sup>6</sup> It improves experience but doesn't give meaning to existence.

**Ecclesiastes 2:3 - <sup>3</sup>I explored with my mind the pull of wine on my body—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to grasp folly, until I could see what is good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.**

The Teacher left the laugh factory feeling more crazy than content, so he ditched comedy and gave chemicals a try. He became a great expert on wine. Later we'll see he didn't just imbibe, he founded great wineries, too.

He wasn't blacking out every night. We see the caveat that his mind still guided him with wisdom. But he experimented with intoxication, different states of mind through chemical agents.

Have you heard of 2021's Best International Picture winner *Another Round*? It's about four friends who embark on an experiment where they will maintain a certain blood alcohol level throughout the workday. In fact, there *have* been scientific studies on constant "micro-dosing" of alcohol.<sup>7</sup> An article I read on it suggested a few positive effects, though you have to watch out for addiction, cancers, digestive diseases, "and other health and social harms to both the drinker and others."

The Teacher asks, "is this good? Will this do for me what I want it to *in the long run*?" He references the brevity of life and the fact that we're *all* headed toward death. So, is this a meaningful way to live out my life? He's trying to *grasp* an answer, but the hevel drifts away with his buzz.

Comedy and chemicals weren't the solve he longed for, so he turned next to great civic endeavors.

**Ecclesiastes 2:4-6 - <sup>4</sup>I increased my achievements. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup>I made gardens and parks for myself and planted every kind of fruit tree in them. <sup>6</sup>I constructed reservoirs for myself from which to irrigate a grove of flourishing trees.**

<sup>6</sup> Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

<sup>7</sup> <https://theconversation.com/another-round-what-really-happens-when-you-microdose-alcohol-166433>

Everything here is in the plural.<sup>8</sup> When the Teacher built, he built a lot and he built big. Palaces, storehouses, fortresses, halls, chariot cities.<sup>9</sup> Orchards and gardens and reservoirs to water them.

But it wasn't for his people, not primarily. See what he says in verse 4? "I built and planted...for myself." He's going to use that phrase five times in these verses.

Now this is interesting: The word for "parks" is the word from which the Greeks got "paradise."<sup>10</sup>

We can see what he's doing: Building a fruitful garden paradise with every comfort and fortification possible. He wants to solve his spiritual angst by constructing the perfect society. He wants to get back to Eden - back before the world was ruined by sin, hounded by death, full of thorns.

The problem is: He wants to jump back into Genesis 2 without doing anything about Genesis 3. There's nothing the Teacher can build or design that fixes the problem of sin. He *wants* Eden, he *wants* that perfect, harmonious creation, but refuses to deal with the problem of the heart. Instead he wants to build his way out of sin. He'll make his *own* kingdom and maybe that will be enough.

And you know what? His efforts yield a lot of earthly success. The groves flourish. The palaces sparkle. The chariot cities make other nations tremble in fear. But the Teacher's utopia won't last. It's just another failed attempt by mankind to create an ideal society without God. It's a long and sorry list. Brook Farm. Soul City. Drop City. Silkville. Fordlandia. Jonestown.<sup>11</sup>

*Right now* tech billionaires are moving forward with their plan for a *new* utopian<sup>12</sup> city between San Francisco and Sacramento, one that will be affordable and sustainable and walkable. They say it will "open up a new path for the state."<sup>13</sup> The leader of the effort says, "I'm going to make this happen no matter what!" They're calling it *California Forever*. So far, they've bought \$800,000,000 of land.

Solomon's utopia was greater than any of these other attempts. The *physical* results were impressive: Extreme wealth, great production, impressive development. But hevel always wins under the sun. The more he built, the more he needed to build it. You plant a grove, well now you need a reservoir to water the trees. The pools of Solomon are still surrounded by a grove of pine trees today, by the way.

Where would he get the labor he needed for his garden paradise?

**Ecclesiastes 2:7 - 7 I acquired male and female servants and had slaves who were born in my house. I also owned livestock—large herds and flocks—more than all who were before me in Jerusalem.**

<sup>8</sup> Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

<sup>9</sup> 1 Kings 7, 9, 2 Chronicles 8

<sup>10</sup> David Hubbard *The Communicator's Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pcmag.com/news/11-failed-utopias-you-can-visit>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/billionaire-backers-of-new-california-city-reveal-map-and-details-of-proposed-development>

<sup>13</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/new-california-city-tech-silicon-valley-4097f0872c4e18ca9d75776e2d8974d9>

Apparently people weren't lining up to *volunteer* for the Teacher's building project. Instead, he had to enslave *thousands* of people. It was *his* dream, not theirs.

Utopia was populated with slaves.<sup>14</sup> But where there are slaves, there are hungry bellies. Now he needed flocks and herds to maintain the workforce. Of course, the more cattle he had, the more people he needed to manage the cattle. From the *human* perspective it looks like greatness and power, but in reality is a never-ending cycle that can't be satisfied. Hevel.

Solomon had a huge number of servants, slaves, and livestock. At the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem we're told he sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. At one point we're told how much food his court ate every day. Given the menu, there would've been *thousands* of workers and servants in the lunch line.<sup>15</sup> An astonishing, productive society.

The point is that Teacher did *work* on a scale unlike anything we've ever known, but it wasn't enough. His heart still ached. And as soon as buildings went up, they started to break down.

His pools were magnificent but now are completely obsolete. Worse, since 1993 at least 6 people have drowned in the pools.<sup>16</sup> It's hevel. Our best efforts plagued by time, death, and chance.

**Ecclesiastes 2:8a - <sup>8</sup>I also amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.**

How do you get the treasure of kings? Either through war or threat of war. Kings don't typically want to part with their treasures. So we've gone from comedy to chemicals to civics to control, now to conflict. Solomon generally experienced peace on every side, but he also actively developed Israel's arms. In fact, he became an arms dealer to the Hittites and Arameans.<sup>17</sup>

Whimsy wasn't satisfying. Neither was work or weapons. So how about wealth? Maybe *that* would be the thing. But he was still empty. He was still looking for the answer.

**Ecclesiastes 2:8b - I gathered male and female singers for myself,**

Maybe entertainment! A waltz or a symphony or a big, lavish show. Maybe he could be exhilarated by the spectacle of performing arts. But once the curtain fell, he felt the same as before.

**Ecclesiastes 2:8c - and many concubines, the delights of men.**

He had tried pleasures of the mind, pleasures of stature, the pleasure of power, pleasures from the finer things of life. Now he went to pleasures of the body.

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<sup>14</sup> Provan

<sup>15</sup> Walter Kaiser Jr. *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*

<sup>16</sup> Dima Srouji *Solomon's pools: A patient Framework Awaiting Its potential*

<sup>17</sup> 1 Kings 10:29

Solomon, of course, had 700 wives and 300 concubines. As with all these pursuits, he went to a further extreme than anyone else possibly could. But his heart was never bettered for any of it.

**Ecclesiastes 2:9-10 - <sup>9</sup>So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; my wisdom also remained with me. <sup>10</sup>All that my eyes desired, I did not deny them. I did not refuse myself any pleasure, for I took pleasure in all my struggles. This was my reward for all my struggles.**

These were not quick projects. It took him thirteen years to build just *his* palace. In these verses, he has briefly described *decades* of pursuits. He *did* become great. There has never been a greater earthly king. He gave himself everything he wanted. He was Howard Hughes without the insanity and J.P. Morgan and Jeff Bezos and Gustave Eiffel and Ernest Gallo.

He's honest about the fact that he *did* experience a lot of moments of pleasure. He felt the buzz. He felt the exhilaration. He felt the pride and the delights. He says here, "I lived 'the good life.'"

*But!*

**Ecclesiastes 2:11 - <sup>11</sup>When I considered all that I had accomplished and what I had labored to achieve, I found everything to be futile and a pursuit of the wind. There was nothing to be gained under the sun.**

"Considered" literally means, "when I faced the facts."<sup>18</sup> When he took a look at all he experienced, all he could say was I *have* laughed. I *was* buzzed. I *was* excited. But none of the physical pleasures or pursuits solved his need. Nothing was *gained*. A lot was *spent*, but he was still empty.

The experiences of pleasure or the accomplishment of great human feats cannot ultimately satisfy. They cannot give us ultimate meaning. They cannot do *anything* about the problem of death. We have such a hard time believing this to be true, no matter who tries to tell us.

Jim Carrey: "*I think everybody should get rich and famous and everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that that's not the answer.*"<sup>19</sup>

Leonardo DiCaprio: "*I've been very lucky to have achieved a lot of the things that I dreamt of achieving...but, at the end of the day - and I truly believe this - it is not about achieving great wealth or success. Because they don't bring happiness ultimately. They really don't.*"<sup>20</sup>

Tom Brady: "*Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what is.' I reached my goal,*

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<sup>18</sup> Eaton

<sup>19</sup> 2005 December 16, The Ottawa Citizen, Carrey's been busted, Continuation title: Carrey—Being rich not the answer by Jay Stone

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/leonardo-dicaprio-wealth-success-dont-make-happy/>

my dream, my life. Me, I think, '... It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't, this can't be what it's all cracked up to be." When the interviewer asked him, "What's the answer?" Brady could only say, "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."<sup>21</sup>

All these fellows feel the same way the Teacher felt because all of them made the same mistake: They all forget the *spiritual*. Oh, they may say they do transcendental meditation or try out different religions or philosophies, but none of them are taking the *right* medicine for what ails them.

At the start of this chapter, the Teacher said, "I'm looking for what is *good*." Where can he find it?

**Micah 6:8 - Mankind, [the Lord] has told each of you what is good and what it is the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God.**

The answer for your life is not whimsy or work or wealth or wine or women. It's *witness* with God. God Who made you and loves you and calls to you and has put eternity in your heart so that you would seek Him, find Him, and be in a forever relationship with Him. *California* forever? No, it's *koinania* forever! Fellowship and communion with God your Creator and Savior and King.

Now, as Christians, we tend to think we can beat the system. We'll have a relationship with God *and* all these other things. Sometimes we try to pursue both. We allow ourselves to put too great an emphasis on wealth or on personal pleasure or on finding our identity in the work we do. But we can only have one Master. There can only be one king in your heart.

"Ok, then I guess we can't laugh or have a good time or if we're paid well, we must not be spiritual." No. What we'll learn later in Ecclesiastes is that we're *supposed* to enjoy life - not just in the house of worship, but at meal times, too. We'll learn that these are *gifts* God gives us as we walk with Him. Because it is His delight to give us joy. The joy of the Lord is our strength! And God does gift some believers with a great deal of earthly resources so they can enjoy them and so they can bless others. God *wants* you to laugh. He *wants* you to enjoy your food. He *wants* you to enjoy intimacy with your spouse. He *wants* you work with excellence at your job and to bless your efforts.

Do we trust Him enough to say to ourselves, "Ok, self, this is not about me, me, me, I, I, I, my pleasure, my comfort, my dreams. This is about me walking with God. Withness with Him. His purposes, His priorities, His provision." That is what is good. That is what fulfills. That is answer the Teacher and Tom Brady and Jim Carry and DiCaprio haven't discovered yet, but we have. And so, let's live with the Lord in faithfulness and service and humility and trust and enjoy the fullness of that withness.

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<sup>21</sup> [https://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/11/03/60minutes/main1008148\\_page3.shtml](https://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/11/03/60minutes/main1008148_page3.shtml)