

The Search for Pleasure

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you to everyone so far who's been involved in leading the service. Just for clarification, that was my bad, not saying to David that Ajan would get up and read the Bible.

I am Martin. That was not Martin that we were just listening to just there. So thank you, Ajan, for reading from God's word to you. Let me just add my welcome to that of David's as well.

It's great to be gathered here together as God's people. And it's wonderful to see you if this is your first time here with us. We really do trust and pray that as we hear from God's word now, that it will speak into your life and that you will come to know, hear and trust in Jesus Christ as your king and savior, because he is the great hope that we are looking for.

Let me pray and then we'll think about the search for pleasure. Father, we thank you that you've made a world which is good. We thank you that as we look back to what your word says about creation, you looked at it and it was a beauty and it was very good and it was stunningly wonderful. And yet we know that even today, our life's experience and the things that we see, it is not all that it could be or should be. And so as we think about what it means for us to live life here in the world under the sun, that your spirit, who is the light of life, would shine upon the pages of the Bible to teach us the great truth that Jesus Christ is the great hope that all of us are looking for.

[1 : 25] So we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Please do open your Bibles up to that passage that Ajan, or passages that Ajan had read for us from Ecclesiastes chapter 2, verse 1 through 11.

And then chapter 3, it's on page 670 in the church Bibles that are there in front of you. Last week, we began a short series looking at the book of Ecclesiastes.

And it'd be fair to say, we noticed that this is quite a complex book. This is not something which is straightforward, and that is in large part to the fact that it comes from quite a different perspective. We are presented with a man who says that he is the teacher. He is seeking to explain life from the perspective that what we have in front of us is all that there is.

Everything around about us, that is all that there is. Life under the sun is what he calls it. He's saying life under the sun is it. And we also established last week that this was, in many ways, a contemporary, to put contemporary words to it, this is what would be defined as like practical secularism.

[2 : 35] Like, this is it. We've only got one life, got one shot. Everything we see around about us, that is it. Nothing else. Nothing beyond. Nothing more. And to do this, the teacher takes on a role.

It's almost like he is putting out in front of us, in this book, a drama, where the teacher is drawing us into the complexities of life as if this is it. It's an artistic performance seeking to awaken our conscience to the vapor-like reality of our lives.

That it is something which is just floating away very quickly. And in one day will disappear. And to do this, he touches on numerous themes. And we're focusing on three big themes.

Last week, we were thinking about pain. How do we deal with pain? What do we do with justice and injustice? Next week, we then think about what we do with our lives. What is it that we are seeking to achieve?

What is the purpose of our existence? What is it that we are seeking to achieve? But today, we're asking the question, how can I be happy? Pleasure. What does that have to do with my life?

[3 : 42] And how does that function? Well, number one, we can see very quickly that pleasure is something that we are made to experience. A very quick survey of our anatomy and the world around us tells us we are beings who have been made to interact with the world in a way which brings pleasure to us.

We have very solid grounds to make that claim, I think. Whether we are someone who follows the Lord or who doesn't yet follow him. But we have a problem with pleasure. And this is where you sit

and you listen and you go, oh no, here comes the gloom.

We have a problem with pleasure. It's what the teacher is raising for us. Do we really have a problem with pleasure, though, teacher? Do we really have a problem, Mr. Teacher? Surely, if we are made to enjoy things, pleasure and happiness is not something which we actually have a problem with.

If this is what we've been made for, then surely all pleasure, any form, is something we are meant to engage with. Well, we do, says the teacher.

He just says very directly, we do have a problem with pleasure. And it's as much a problem for the religious as it is for the skeptic. The skeptic would say, well, this is it.

[4 : 51] I'm not here for a long time. I'm here for a good time. So let the good times roll and let's just get on with life. Okay. Let's see how that ends up. Let's see where that leads.

Let's see where that goes to. The religious, on the other hand, would say something like this. There are good things that exist in the world, but we should actually be more concerned on matters which are spiritual rather than pleasures.

Okay. Let's see where that leads. Let's see where that goes. Does that actually align itself with who God is and what he actually says in his word? I want us to just think through three things.

We begin with the problem of pleasure, the problem that we have with pleasure. Look down at the passage with me, particularly verse one. The teacher turns to pleasure.

Okay. Verse one, it says, I said to myself, come now, I will do this. Okay. He doesn't start by indulging himself in pleasure.

[5 : 50] He's been seeking to understand the world through wisdom. That's really what a lot of chapter one has been tackling. Seeking to understand the world through wisdom, first of all.

But he sees that life is not that straightforward. It's not as simple as just going into the university library, scrolling through some really good articles to make sense of the world and all of the different things which are around about us.

He says, it's not actually as simplistic as this. It is messy. It is complex. The books don't have all the answers. And I'm pretty sure in a room like this, everyone here has experienced this in some way in their life.

It doesn't just work out how you want it to. You might have thought that you've got all the answers and you've got everything neatly packaged. And then actually life hits you and it's far more complicated than we want it to be.

And it's in this moment that he turns to pleasure. Come now, I will do this. When the complexity of life confronts him and there seems to be no answers, it seems like there is nothing left open to him or to us than seeking to please ourselves in that moment.

[6 : 58] That's the narrative of what we would define as Western culture over the last few centuries. And when I say Western, I mean sort of Western Europe, North American culture.

There is no big picture. There is no absolute. There is no moral standard which ultimately is at the center of what we do. And so we have formed and created a culture and a narrative which places me, the individual, at the center of reality.

I get to define what is good and true. I get to define what is right and wrong. There is nothing which is absolute. And so therefore, if it doesn't meet my standard, then well, tough.

You'll have to put up with the way that I perceive the world. This is a challenge which is growing exponentially as we live through the AI revolution of our day. We are increasingly engaging with a world which is gaming our preferences.

It is literally set up to game what we do with our time. Our preferences which can be constructed to define our reality. Our niche pleasures become targets because they are highly profitable to certain companies.

[8 : 05] Our political or social persuasions become things that are tapped into through these avenues, particularly social media, because they are strategically and economically beneficial to the companies who want that information and they want you to go in this particular direction.

And if we're really honest, we're kind of okay with it. We like it because it allows us to construct a reality where my wants are being met.

My idea of the world is being backed up. Not only are we presented with a narrower window of choices which meet our needs when we begin to follow this track, we now have a whole realm put out in front of us which is being curated for my little kingdom to be enthroned, where my personal

preferences are the best and realistically nobody else has got the opportunity to speak into those. If this is all there is at the end of the day, then well, why not? My personal pleasure is really all that matters. My personal happiness is the only standard that truly makes sense.

See, I could really excite David and quote another poet, but it's not because I've read a lot of poetry, it's because I enjoy listening to Charlie and the Chocolate Factory with the kids. What happens to us is this, we become the music makers, we become the dreamer of dreams, and we create a little reality for ourselves, and we allow lots of other things to influence us, shaping this little gem that we can hold in our hands.

[9 : 46] Follow the teacher because he does this as well. Notice how often he speaks in the first person throughout this section, he talks about the fact that he will test, I said, I tried, I did all these things, I, me, I was doing all of these things.

I will build. When there is no other perceived meaning for us, no other story which is greater than ourselves, we begin to fold into ourselves. We begin to fold right in upon ourselves. And we're going to come back to this in just a moment. The teacher doesn't mess about when he goes down this path of pursuing pleasure. Follow his trail of hedonism. He writes it down for us quite happily and quite clearly. He gives himself to wine and to parties, to laughter and to pleasure. It's what you see in verses 2 to 3, isn't it? He surrounds himself with the nicest environments, the best music, and he really enjoys his sexuality, is what you see in verses 4 to 8. It's helpful here to notice these two different words of laughter and pleasure because laughter originally has these connotations of more coarseness.

So laughter has this connotation of coarseness that comes with it and pleasure has this connotation or suggestion of sophistication. So what's he saying? What's he saying when he's using these two things and putting them against each other?

[11 : 04] Here's what he's saying. High culture, low culture, they're all the same. They're all the same. At the end of the day, these things are all going to pass.

If this is it and the momentary pleasure that I get from them is going to pass, then they're all the same, aren't they? Go out and get hammered. Go to a rave. Or go to the opera.

Get dressed nicely. He says it doesn't matter. It's all the same. It all heads in the same direction. It all leads to disappointment because it will lead to a diminished return as life goes on.

That shocks us and awakens us, doesn't it? As the teacher gives himself to pleasure, we hear that his wisdom is still with him, though. Now, this is a really annoying little section, a little annoying verse that comes up twice here.

And there are various ways that people seek to interpret this and apply this. Some would say something like this. He only goes so far. He only goes so far. He dips his toe into the realm of pleasure, but he only goes so far.

[12 : 10] I personally, I don't think that that is what he's saying. I don't think that the teacher is saying that at all. Remember, he is assuming a role. He is describing, if this is it, then this is all we have.

And he's trying to take us on this journey to play out the rife of a practical secularist. Constraint is not on the table for him. So what does he mean? It is the common phenomenon that all of us have experienced, whether you're a believer or skeptic.

When we're doing something, but we realize maybe this is not something we should be doing. When we're doing something, we think this is going to be the great prize, which will give us meaning and it will satisfy us.

And at the end of the day, we are still sitting in our beds thinking, what is it all about? Something niggles, something jars, and something pierces into our perception of reality.

And as we go deeper down the path, as we go deeper down the path of that pleasure that we are seeking to find life in, a light shines across. It exposes its vanity, but instead of turning back, here's what we do.

[13 : 14] We just have to go deeper into the path. We just have to follow at that one step more because following at that one step more is going to lead to life and it doesn't. We double down on the road that we're already going and there is the problem.

The turn to personal pleasure, the folding in upon ourselves, means that when we face all of the complexities of life, doesn't actually deal with the reality of my life.

And what it does do is create a scenario where I become sedated through sensation to the minute that it does that. And it cracks.

And it can no longer produce, provide the pleasure, the satisfaction, the joy, the life, the hope that we once thought that it could. And here's the reason that pleasure fails, which is our second point. The problem, but then the reason why pleasure fails. The teacher tells us why. The pursuit of personal pleasure cannot bear the weight we've placed on it as a society.

[14:20] What we are looking for in the pursuit of pleasure is a lasting beauty, something which will go on and on, which thrills our hearts and will never end.

We are looking for some sort of transcendence. We are looking for something beyond ourselves. We are looking for something that takes us from under the sun to above the sun, beyond the sun, to give us value.

We are looking for something in the pursuit of pleasure, under the sun, which ultimately cannot bear the load that we are giving to it. Now, stop, Martin. Take a breath.

Ground this in reality. Let's do that. We've just recently come back into the UK. Here are a few things that we've noted in the time that we've come back. Our culture places a massive amount of weight on travel.

New places, new experiences. Wanting to see different places in the world. These are good things. This is a beautiful thing. I love to do that. But it always leaves us wanting more.

[15:18] There's always more we could do, more we could see. And at the end of the holiday, at the end of the experience, at the end of the gap year, at the end of whatever it is, we want more.

And it doesn't finally and fully satisfy. Sex. Physical sensation. Relational connection. But you see, the more and more that our culture has given itself to sex, what has happened?

Greater and greater brokenness. The heart and the mind want more. They want stability. And yet can never find it. And there is a restlessness which exists all around about us.

Food. Myriad of different textures, flavors, and experiences. Again, I am not standing at the front saying, here, food is a bad thing. It is not. It is a good thing. It is there for us to enjoy.

God has given us these things. However, our bodies and themselves betray the worldview that we are trying to make. It always needs more.

[16:17] It always wants more. It always has to consume. There is never enough. That's why, that's what we hear the teacher saying, isn't it?

Verses 10 to 11. He said, I denied myself nothing. My eyes desired. I refused my heart, no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor.

And this was the reward for my toil. Yet when I surveyed what my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. Now think about it. This guy is nothing like us in one sense, is he? This guy is being described to us as somebody who has both the ability and also the resources to do whatever he wants.

He can say that all the, he is someone who is not like us and yet even he can turn around and say all of the pleasure of the world which I could have at the touch of my fingers it was never enough.

[17:22] It was like trying to bottle the wind. It didn't last and it left me feeling empty. The teacher is not saying pleasure is wrong. He's saying he tried it all.

He refused his heart, no pleasure, verse 11. And here's why it fails. Because the pursuit of pleasure is a pursuit of love. Here what the teacher spells out for us in chapter 3, verse 11.

It's why we have to read this with a few different passages all at once because it's very important that we don't just get one little slither and fail to recognize the big picture. Read chapter 3, verse 11.

He has made everything that is God. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

As humans, we desire what? Beauty. God has made everything beautiful in its time. We are people who have been made in God's image and so therefore we desire things which are beautiful, things which bring pleasure.

[18:25] We want something which is beautiful, which lasts. And life under the sun with all of its wonderful pleasures cannot ultimately provide this for us.

There are loves which exist deep down within us that we are seeking to satisfy and if we are simply pursuing ourselves and our wants and whims, then we will never find that joy and rested contentment that we are desiring.

Ed Sheeran has a song that's just come out, I think it was this year. Certainly it's new to me. It turns out that in the country we live in, normally we are not hearing Ed Sheeran getting played on the radio very often and I was listening to it and it really struck right through me when I was listening to it because in some ways what he is writing in the chorus of this new song called Old Phone really hits at the heart as we watch time go past and as we see life and all of its complexity begin to unfold, he says this, conversations with my dead friends, messages from all my exes.

I kind of think that it was best left, his old phone that is, in the past where it belongs. I feel an overwhelming sadness of all the friends that I don't have left, seeing how my family has fractured growing up and moving on.

That's perceptive, isn't it? That's a lovely summation of life in the my pleasing myself generation of Western culture, family fractured, friends who have passed on, exes who no longer want us.

[20 : 02] We just want to keep it all in a box back here but we know that it follows us around in our hearts right here. Loves which have been lost, loves which have been broken, loves which we can bear no longer but they come with us into the present.

The very things that we thought would bring us life in that moment when we were chasing them and we were pursuing them, we thought they would bring life and satisfaction have actually brought us deeper into discontentment.

Here's life under the sun, living our best lives right now and our hearts are reaching for something to love which will bring us satisfaction and unending joy.

When our hearts are asking that, pleading for that, longing for that, surely we have to be asking where did that come from? That's what we need to look at next.

Where does pleasure point us to? If pleasure is all about the pursuit of our hearts and our hearts are reaching for something beyond them, we need to ask that question. Where does that longing come from within our hearts?

[21 : 10] If this is it, if there's nothing beyond, where does that longing come from within us? Think about it. If we are just a bunch of cells, according to the secular position, one day we'll drop, be consumed by the earth.

So why is it that when we listen to something, it stirs our hearts? Why is it that we look at some art, it stirs our souls? Why do those things produce that response within us?

Why is it that there are certain pleasures that exist in the world in which we are made, which help us to recognize, actually, this isn't all there is, there is something more? Why do random waves of sound enter into our ears and light that enters into our eyes and refracts in a certain way, bring us moments of emotion which are profound or self-reflection which changes and alters the course of our life?

Why does that happen if this is it? You see, our beauty, our response to beauty betrays us if that is the way that we want to see the world.

It lifts the lid and it shows that we are longing for something beyond ourselves. We desire this point of transcendence. Every moment of pleasure is pointing us in the direction and it is something that we want.

[22 : 26] We want this thing to satisfy. We want something that is going to liberate us from the brutality and the pain of the life that sometimes we have to endure under the sun so that one day we will soar above the stars.

This is what the teacher seeks to do. Did you notice that in chapter 2, verses 4 to 9? Chapter 2, verses 4 to 9, what does he do? He tries to build for himself something that goes all the way back to the very beginning of creation.

He tries to cultivate an updated garden of Eden, verses 4 through 9. I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself. I planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees.

I made reservoirs of water groves and flourishing trees. There were men and women, male and female slaves. I had other slaves that were born in my house. I had herds and flocks more than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold, pleasures, etc. Let's go on. He is seeking to create and cultivate a secular garden of Eden. He is seeking to go back to that place of paradise.

[23 : 39] But cultivating a secular garden of Eden simply highlights to us that every single human is haunted by that paradise which no longer exists. something that we long for but remains out of reach.

We've really got into reading Narnia recently as a family with Sophia and she's really enjoying it and C.S. Lewis is one of these guys who just really captures so much of what it means to understand God's purposes in the world and he refers to that deep longing, this echo which is here.

He says it is a music that we are born remembering. the longing in the heart that you have for that place of getting beyond to go above the stars is the music that you are born remembering.

Here's how he explains it in more depth. He says the books or the music in which we thought the beauty itself was located will be something which betrays us if we trust in them. It was not in them. It only came through them and what came through them was longing. These things the beauty the memory of our own past are good images of what we really desire but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols breaking the hearts of their worshippers for they are not the thing itself.

[25 : 03] They are only the scent of a flower we have not found the echo of a tune we have not heard news from a country we have not yet visited.

Do you sense that in your soul in your heart in your life the echo of a music which just exists and that you so desire and it's been there right from the start and you remember it but you don't quite know where it comes from.

this is where it comes from. The search for pleasure and the fact that there is never enough to sustain us under the sun points us beyond ourself it actually turns us away from the cultural trajectory that we are on it moves us beyond ourselves because we need to turn out from ourselves rather than search inside to receive the joy and happiness that we are seeking and that is the good news of God.

The good news of God is that you do not need to look into yourself to find yourself you need to look out of yourself to find him to see him receive him.

The beauty that our heart craves is found in Jesus Christ alone. The never ending love that we are seeking to rejoice in is found in Jesus Christ alone.

[26 : 29] You see Jesus is the perfect one he is the eternal son the person who authored the music that you have been born remembering in the very center of your being.

He is endless beauty and he is ultimate joy and yet the wonder of the gospel of God is this the beautiful one who knew nothing but joy and perfection stepped down into our existence and here's the way that one of the prophets summed up who he was.

The beautiful one became ugly the perfect one becomes tarnished so that you and I can be beautified. Here's what the prophet said Isaiah many were appalled at him his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form was marred beyond human likeness.

Why? Because as he came into the world to reach out and show us that the beauty we so long for and desired is found in him alone it meant that he was cut off.

His beauty was put to the side so that us the ugly would receive a beauty which is not our own. That when he goes to the cross to die for us he is beaten and he is made ugly not just physically but under the weight of sin.

[27 : 53] At the cross Jesus speaks and I think this is just so wonderful. He speaks with a man whose life is less than beautiful. A man who is right there with him at the point where his life is ebbing away and here's what this man says as his search for pleasure as his search for meaning under the sun is coming to an end.

this man makes a very simple request when he turns around to Jesus who is dying there with him in all of his marred beauty. He turns around and he says Jesus will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?

Yeah. Because today you will be with me in paradise. there's a response isn't it?

Why say that? You today will be in the place of the beauty that your heart has longed for all of its days and the song you were born remembering will become this wonderful symphony all around you and you will see what it is that you have longed for all your life.

you see that music pierces into our reality when we look upon Jesus Christ. Not a quick glance I have to add.

[29 : 26] Not just a oh well you know Jesus is kind of there. No an intentional gaze. This is the love that is going to last. This is the love which is going to lead to everlasting joy and pleasures are found at the right hand of God which will never fail you forever.

If you're a skeptic here take the time with Jesus. Have you ever taken the time with Jesus? Not just the glance but the intentional gaze. Stopped what you're doing.

Not just fighting against him but actually sitting saying who are you? Why is it that this rumble is still here? Look to him and listen to what he says but if you are a religious person here why is it that you believe in Jesus?

Why is it that you actually believe in Jesus? Jesus isn't just someone who is beneficial. Jesus is someone who is beautiful. You see the Christian gospel is not just a case of well I kind of do God. The Christian gospel says this that Jesus Christ is not just someone who's beneficial. Jesus is beautiful. He is the reason that I will put down everything about my life because in him I have absolutely everything.

[30 : 42] There is nothing which compares to him. Not just beneficial but beautiful. It's only when we see Jesus as beautiful that we will actually begin to turn away from the things which claw at our heels, which pull at our heart, which seek to take us down the roads of pleasure that we know are not good for us and that we know are not God's intent for our life.

There was an old Scottish preacher about 200 years ago and he referred to this as the expulsive power of a new affection and in 21st century language getting to know Jesus to the point that there is nothing greater than him.

You're only going to stop doing the things that you know don't please God when ultimately he is the greatest love of your life because it's a pleasure pursuit. That's what you're on.

You want to find meaning in the pleasure. You want it to dull. And what the gospel says is that's never going to change until he becomes the greatest and everything else gets put to the side.

Believers, we need to do these three things. Very simple sum up for those who believe in Jesus.

You need to take time with Jesus. We need to take time with Jesus. Those things are not going to leave us unless we're taking time with him.

[32 : 02] And that's not just a sort of religious command, a sort of pharisaical, you've got to now go and you've got to read the Bible at a set time every day. You've got to spend time with Jesus.

Speaking with him, listening to him, hearing from the Bible, really receiving from him, spending time with him.

I've kind of touched on the second part which is that we need to pray. We need to speak and hear and listen to him because that is the place where we are going to grow deeper, where our heart is going to enlarge to receive the joy and the pleasures that we so desire and we also need to walk in the Spirit of God.

I love the fact that Tim Keller refers to that. He says, every art gallery has a light. You can't see the beauty if the light's not shining onto it.

And what he's trying to say is we need to be dependent on the Spirit of God to be that light which shines on the beauty of Jesus so that our hearts again enlarge to see that he is truly beautiful, that he is truly magnificent and we need to humble ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to show us the superior worth of Jesus by comparison to anything else because that is what brings glory to our heavenly Father.

Let me pray. Father, thank you for your many good gifts. Thank you that we get to experience so many things which are beautiful and wonderful in the world you've made.

[33 : 36] And whether we are people who know you and love you or whether at this stage we don't yet know you, our prayer is that we would reflect on the wonder of Jesus.

We would take the time to intentionally see him, gaze on him and recognize that his beauty becomes marred so that our ugliness can be beautified in him.

Father, help us to walk by your Holy Spirit that he would light up the beauty of Jesus Christ so that we would seek to follow him with all that we are and all that we have and that you would make us more like him moment by moment every day.

Amen. We're going to reflect on the theme of the enduring pleasure, joy, worth of Jesus and of God's kingdom in the next two songs that we sing.

First of all, we stand amazed in the presence of Jesus and secondly, we sing a new song, salvation song, which speaks about the fact that the mountains and the stars will come and go but Christ will stand forever, love's enduring splendor.

[34 : 54] Let's stand and if we're able to.