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The Royal Experiment

Wisdom, Pleasure, and Labour — Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26

◆ The World's Most Expensive Experiment

In 2021, Elon Musk, at the time the wealthiest person in the world, posted a tweet that puzzled many of his followers: 'The amount of "meaning" people ascribe to money is bizarre.'

He had **\$300 billion**. He had built multiple revolutionary companies. He had a vision for colonising Mars. And he was publicly questioning whether wealth produces what people expect from it.

He is not the first.

Howard Hughes died alone in a darkened hotel room, his body identified only by fingerprints.

John D. Rockefeller, the richest man of his generation, was by his fifties reportedly unable to keep solid food down, tormented by an anxiety no fortune could calm.

These are not isolated stories. They are data points in an experiment that has been run, informally, ten thousand times: **give a human being everything they want, and watch what happens to their soul.**

Three thousand years earlier, a man with resources many times greater than Musk's, relative to the economy of his day, sat in Jerusalem and conducted the same experiment more rigorously, more comprehensively, and with better record-keeping. He did not merely acquire wealth. **He tested wisdom, pleasure, and massive construction** projects in turn, like a scientist running controlled trials, and he wrote down the results for us to read.

His name was Solomon, though he calls himself simply 'the Preacher' **Qoheleth in the Hebrew**, one who assembles and addresses a congregation. He is the world's original venture capitalist of meaning.

He invested everything a human life can invest intellect, wealth, pleasure, ambition, power and audited the returns with total honesty. His conclusion should stop every ambitious person in their tracks.

We will walk through five stages of Solomon's experiment: wisdom, pleasure, the comparison of wisdom to folly, the anguish of unrewarded labour, and finally the one surprising discovery that survives the wreckage of everything else.

If you have ever built something, achieved something, or acquired something and felt strangely empty at the summit, this text was written for you.

I. The Experiment Begins with Intelligence

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14, *"I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. ¹⁴I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind."*

Notice the method: *'I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom.'*

This is not casual observation or an armchair theory. This is the vocabulary of an expedition, not a stroll.

The Preacher applied his full intellectual capacity the greatest mind of his age, a man to whom kings and queens travelled great distances just to ask him questions (**1 Kings 10:1-3**) to a systematic investigation of all human experience.

'Concerning all things that are done under heaven' is a claim to comprehensive scope.

He is not cherry-picking convenient examples to prove a point he had already decided on.

He is conducting a universal survey, the ancient equivalent of a longitudinal study across every domain of human striving:

- Politics
- architecture,
- agriculture,
- the arts,

- commerce,
- philosophy,
- pleasure.

Think of what this means practically.

Solomon had at his disposal precisely the **two things** every modern researcher wishes for and almost never gets: **unlimited resources and unlimited time.**

He did not need a grant application.

He did not need to cut the study short because the funding ran out.

He had **forty years** on the throne and the treasury of the wealthiest kingdom on earth. If anyone could have found meaning by exhausting every human possibility, it would have been him.

Immediately he names the cost: *'this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man.'*

The search for meaning is not easy. It is not comfortable but a burden.

The Hebrew ***Inyan*** means a heavy occupation, a pressing concern, something that weighs on the mind the way a physical load weighs on the shoulders. The search for meaning is hard precisely because the answer is not obvious, and the false answers are so attractive.

Consider how this plays out today.

We live in a culture that offers a thousand pre-packaged answers to the question 'what is my life for' career, family,

causes, platform, body, bank balance and each one is marketed as though self-evidently sufficient.

Nobody sells you emptiness. Every answer on the shelf comes gift-wrapped as fulfilment. Discovering which of these gifts is actually empty requires exactly the kind of costly, patient, disciplined search that Solomon describes. Most people never do the search. They simply assume the wrapping paper tells the truth about what is inside.

Proverbs 4:7, *"Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding."*

Proverbs 4:7 commends the pursuit of wisdom as the primary acquisition 'the principal thing.'

This is not a minor detail we can quietly step around. It sits as a direct, sharp tension at the front door of this sermon.

How can Ecclesiastes call wisdom *hebel* vapour, breath, smoke that dissolves the instant you try to grasp it while Proverbs calls wisdom the chief thing a person can acquire?

The resolution is crucial, and it is the interpretive key that unlocks the entire book of Ecclesiastes.

The wisdom of Proverbs is God-centred wisdom, beginning with the fear of the LORD (**Proverbs 9:10**)

Wisdom that starts by acknowledging a Creator, a moral order, and a final accounting.

The wisdom the Preacher finds disappointing in chapter 1 is **secular wisdom**. Brilliant human intelligence applied 'under the sun,' without reference to anything above the sun.

Same word, wisdom.

Two entirely different objects.

Picture **two engineers examining the same bridge**.

One studies it as an isolated structure, cut off from any purpose an object with no destination, no traffic to carry, no city on either side. He will conclude, correctly, that the bridge is meaningless: concrete spanning nothing, going nowhere.

The other studies the same bridge but knows what it connects, who built it, and why.

Same steel. Same concrete. Entirely different verdict.

That is the difference between wisdom 'under the sun' and wisdom 'in the fear of the LORD.'

- Wisdom 'under the sun' is grief.
- Wisdom 'in the fear of the LORD' is life.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18, *"I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge."¹⁷And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.¹⁸For in much wisdom is much grief, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."*

The Burden of Clear Sight

'In much wisdom is much grief.'

This is one of the most counter-cultural statements in the Bible and one of the most empirically verifiable.

The more clearly a person sees the world, the more painful the seeing becomes.

- The poet sees beauty others miss and also pain that others are insulated from.
- The doctor who understands disease lives with the knowledge of what awaits every patient who walks through the door and everyone else besides.
- The pastor who has sat at enough hospital bedsides and graveside services knows that wisdom and pain are inseparable companions.

You cannot have the discernment without absorbing the weight that discernment reveals.

Modern research on well-being has stumbled onto the same discovery Solomon made three thousand years ago. Studies on so-called 'depressive realism' have found that people with mild depression frequently assess risk and their own limitations more accurately than people who are not depressed.

The healthy mind protects itself with a small, constant supply of comfortable illusions. Take those illusions away through greater clarity, and you gain accuracy at the cost of comfort. This is precisely Solomon's point, arrived at through a laboratory rather than a throne room.

This is why the world prefers comfortable illusions to uncomfortable truths. This is why a philosophy that offers easy answers is more popular in the marketplace of ideas than a philosophy that forces honest confrontation with reality. Nobody queues around the block for a book that tells them the truth is going to hurt.

The Preacher is warning his readers that the pursuit of wisdom is not a path to happiness as the world defines happiness.

But it is a path to something more important.

A genuine understanding of reality, which is the necessary precondition for a genuine, rooted, unshakeable joy.

A joy that does not collapse the moment circumstances change, because it was never built on illusion in the first place.

1 Corinthians 1:19–21, *"For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.' ²⁰Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."*

Paul's brilliant commentary on **Ecclesiastes 1:17–18**.

The wisdom of the world was insufficient to find God, and God knew it would be. This is why the gospel comes not as a sophisticated philosophical system, argued from first

principles in the manner of the Greek schools, but as a blunt historical declaration: Christ crucified.

The world's wisdom cannot process this.
A crucified Saviour looks like the ultimate contradiction.
Power expressed through weakness,
Victory achieved through defeat,
Wisdom disguised as folly.

It appears foolish to a mind trained only in the categories of 'under the sun.' But those who receive it discover a wisdom that surpasses everything the world's greatest minds have ever produced, because it did not originate under the sun. It came down from above it.

God designed human wisdom to be insufficient. Not to humiliate us, but to show us that the most important knowledge, the knowledge of God cannot be arrived at by intelligence alone. It must be received.

This is the fundamental difference between philosophy and revelation.

- *Philosophy reaches upward and finds its ceiling.*
- *Revelation comes down.*

Every great philosophical system in human history, however brilliant, eventually runs into the same wall.

A ceiling above which unaided human reason cannot climb. Solomon had the finest natural mind in the whole of the Old Testament, and even he hit that ceiling. If Solomon could not think his way to God, no one can. That is not bad news. It is the reason we needed a Bethlehem.

Solomon's first experiment, the experiment of the mind, ended at a ceiling. So, he turned to a different laboratory: the body, and its capacity for pleasure.

II. The Pleasure Experiment

Ecclesiastes 2:1–3, *"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure'; but surely, this also was vanity. ²I said of laughter—'Madness!'; and of mirth, 'What does it accomplish?'" ³I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives."*

The critical phrase is '*while guiding my heart with wisdom.*'

The Preacher was not a reckless pleasure-seeker, stumbling from one indulgence to the next with no capacity for reflection.

He brought his full intelligence into this experiment, the same rigorous method he had just applied to the study of wisdom.

He tested pleasure in the most controlled and intentional way possible not surrendering to it blindly, like a man swept along by a current, but observing it carefully, with full cognitive engagement, like a scientist who takes the drug himself in order to record its exact effects.

This makes his conclusion more devastating, not less.

If he had been intoxicated by his pleasures and unable to evaluate them clearly, we might discount his verdict as the grumbling of a man who never truly enjoyed anything.

But he maintained his observational capacity throughout. He drank the wine and kept a clear head about what the wine was doing to him.

His verdict is blunt: *'Madness. What does it accomplish?'*

- The pleasures were real.
- The satisfaction was real — but temporary.
- The residue, on sober examination, was nothing.

Ecclesiastes 2:4–9, *"I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. ⁵I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made myself water pools from which to  water the growing trees of the grove. ⁷I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. ⁹So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me."*

Read this list as an ancient LinkedIn profile of achievements, or better, as the ancient equivalent of a magazine cover story on the world's most successful entrepreneur.

- Houses
- Vineyards
- Gardens
- Water systems — an engineering marvel in his day
- Servants
- Livestock
- Silver, gold
- The wealth of provinces
- Singers and musicians
- The full cultural, aesthetic, and material richness of the ancient world

No one before or after Solomon assembled this combination of material and aesthetic abundance.

Archaeologists still argue over the scale of his building projects at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer cities he fortified and adorned on a scale that stunned his contemporaries.

This was not a modest life supplemented with a few luxuries. This was the single most resourced human experiment in ancient history.

None of this was gained by accident or squandered by carelessness.

V 3 *'guiding my heart with wisdom.'*

Solomon pursued pleasure the way a disciplined investor pursues returns by intentionally, strategically, and comprehensively.

If pleasure, gathered wisely and at maximum scale, cannot deliver lasting meaning, then no amount of it, gathered less wisely and at a smaller scale, ever will.

This is the argument from the greatest possible case. If the experiment fails at its absolute maximum, it cannot succeed anywhere below that maximum.

Ecclesiastes 2:10–11, *"Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, For my heart rejoiced in all my labour; And this was my reward from all my labour. ¹¹ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labour in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun."*

'This was my reward from all my labour.'

The pleasure during the pursuit was real.

The Preacher is not saying that pleasure is a lie, or that enjoyment is impossible, or that he gritted his teeth through forty years of misery. He rejoiced.

The wine tasted good.

The music was beautiful.

The gardens were genuinely gardens of delight.

He is saying that when he completed the survey and asked the ultimate question.

The only question that actually matters and the answer was no.

Is this it? Is this enough? Can this bear the weight of a life?

The answer was no.

Luke 12:29-31, *"And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you."*

Notice how precisely this lands on Solomon's own experiment. The Preacher had said, back in verse 3, that he searched 'how to gratify my flesh with wine' the pursuit of eating and drinking as an end in itself, the attempt to make the appetite the answer to the ache.

Jesus takes up exactly this territory food, drink, the anxious human scramble to secure enough of both and names it for what it is: the preoccupation of 'the nations,' the default operating system of a world that has no Father to trust.

Jesus is not condemning eating and drinking. He is condemning the anxious seeking that turns eating and drinking into a substitute god the very same substitution the Preacher tested to exhaustion and found wanting.

'The nations of the world seek after' these things because, without a heavenly Father, food, drink, and comfort are the only security available.

Solomon had more food, more drink, and more comfort than any of 'the nations' could imagine, gathered by the wisest man alive, and it still could not answer the ache.

Jesus supplies the missing variable: *'your Father knows that you need these things.'*

The problem was never the presence of pleasure.
The problem was the absence of a Father to receive it from.

'But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.'

This is the reordering the whole book of Ecclesiastes strains toward and cannot yet articulate because Ecclesiastes is written before the King arrived to announce his kingdom.

Solomon can diagnose the disease with unmatched precision.
He does not yet have the prescription.

Jesus supplies it.

Stop making the created thing the object of your seeking and make the Kingdom the object of your seeking and the created things, food and drink included, take their proper place as gifts received rather than gods pursued.

Modern research on happiness has, almost accidentally, confirmed Solomon's data.

The **Harvard Study of Adult Development** the longest-running study of human happiness in history found repeatedly that **neither wealth nor achievement predicted well-being in later life.**

What predicted well-being was the quality and depth of a person's relationships, especially a stable relationship with something, or someone, larger than the self.

Lottery winners have been studied extensively too. After the initial spike, most return within roughly a year to very close to their prior baseline level of happiness '**hedonic adaptation.**'

The pleasure genuinely happened. It simply did not last, exactly as Solomon reported three thousand years earlier without a research grant or a control group just an honest king with an open notebook.

*The revolution in **Ecclesiastes 2:10–11** is not the discovery that pleasure is evil. It is the discovery that pleasure is insufficient.*

Pleasure is real.

Beauty is real.

The satisfaction of achievement is real.

But none of them can answer the question the soul is actually asking:

Is there more?

Is this all?

Where is the ground?

The answer lies not in more pleasure, or better pleasure, but in the God who is the ground of all pleasure the Father Jesus describes, who knows what you need before you anxiously seek it, and who invites you to receive it rather

than chase it.

III. Wisdom vs Folly. Death Equals Everything.

Ecclesiastes 2:13–16, *"Then I saw that wisdom excels folly As light excels darkness. ¹⁴The wise man's eyes are in his head, But the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived That the same event happens to them all. ¹⁵So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity." ¹⁶For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!"*

The Preacher makes a concession here, and it is worth pausing on, because Ecclesiastes is often mimicked as a book of pure gloom that denies any good thing has value. That portrait is false, and this verse proves it.

Wisdom is genuinely better than folly *'as light excels darkness.'*

This is not negativism.

Wisdom has real, practical advantages.

- The wise person navigates life better. Fewer ruined relationships, fewer reckless decisions, fewer self-inflicted disasters.

- The fool stumbles in the dark, bumping into consequences he never saw coming because he never looked.

Intelligence, education, and discernment are genuine goods, and Ecclesiastes never asks us to pretend otherwise.

But the concession is immediately relativised by one inescapable fact: **death**.

The wise person dies.

The fool dies.

After death, the world forgets both of them with equal thoroughness a truth every generation rediscovers and every generation resent.

Ask yourself, honestly, the name of your own great-great-grandfather. Most of us cannot answer, wise or foolish though he may have been. Time is a remarkably efficient eraser, and it does not check credentials before it erases.

If death is the final word, then the advantage of wisdom over folly is real but temporary.

Like being in a faster vehicle when both vehicles are heading for the same cliff edge. The faster car gets a better view on the way down. It does not avoid the fall.

Steve Jobs, in his **2005 Stanford commencement address**, said almost the same thing Solomon says here: *'Remembering that I will be dead soon is the most important tool I have ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life... almost everything all external expectations, all pride, all fear of*

embarrassment or failure these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.'

Jobs used death as a filter for urgency.
Solomon uses it as something far more radical.

A filter for ultimate meaning.
Urgency answers the question.

What should I do today?

Solomon is asking the deeper question. **Does any of it matter, once the light goes out?**

1 Corinthians 15:55–57, *“O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?”* ⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Paul's answer to Ecclesiastes 2:14–16 is the resurrection.

If death has the last word, the Preacher is right. Wisdom is a temporary advantage over an equalising doom, nothing more.

But if death does not have the last word.

1 Corinthians 15:54, *'Death is swallowed up in victory'* then wisdom has permanent significance, because the life built on wisdom survives the very death that the Preacher so feared.

Jesus Christ is the answer to Ecclesiastes' most haunting question.

What if death erases all difference?

The resurrection declares that it does not.

The wise person who has built their life on the fear of God does not merely live better than the fool.

They survive what the fool cannot.

The eternal difference between wisdom and folly is not a difference of degree, measured in decades. It is the difference between life and death, measured in eternity.

This is why the empty tomb changes absolutely everything the Preacher wrote.

- Solomon is describing the world as it appears from inside a sealed tomb.
- Paul is writing from the far side of a tomb that did not stay sealed.

IV. The Anguish of Work

Ecclesiastes 2:18–23, *"Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labour in which I had toiled under the sun. ²¹For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not laboured for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²For what has man for*

all his labour, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?²³ For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity."

This is the Preacher's most emotionally raw moment in the first two chapters.

'I hated all my labour.'

Not a mild disappointment. Hatred.

Why?

Because he has done the calculation that most high achievers spend their whole lives refusing to do.

What happens to everything I have built after I am gone?

The answer is devastating, and unusually for a philosophical claim in Scripture historically verifiable within a single generation.

Solomon's son Rehoboam inherited the greatest empire in the ancient Near East and, within roughly **two years**, had split it in two through arrogant, foolish counsel, rejecting the wisdom of the elders who had served his father and listening instead to friends his own age who told him what his pride wanted to hear (**1 Kings 12**).

Everything Solomon built assembled, organised, and maintained across four decades of relentless labour was unravelled within a generation by a man Solomon could not choose, could not train fully enough, and could not control from the grave.

Read 1 Kings 12 slowly some time. It is Ecclesiastes 2:18–19 acted out on the stage of real history, complete with names, dates, and a kingdom torn in half.

This is not a hypothetical anxiety Solomon invented to sound philosophical. It happened to his own house, exactly as he feared it would.

Every builder faces some version of this.

- The founder who spends thirty years building a company, only to watch a successor unwind it in three.
- The parent who pours everything into raising children, with no guarantee of how those children will steward what they were given.
- The reformer who spends a lifetime building an institution, unable to guarantee what the next generation will do with it.

Solomon names the anxiety that sits underneath every ambitious project ever undertaken. I cannot control the future from the grave.

Psalm 49:10–12, *“For he sees wise men die; Likewise the fool and the senseless person perish, And leave their wealth to others. ¹¹Their inner thought is that their houses will last forever, Their dwelling places to all generations; They call their lands after their own names. ¹²Nevertheless man, though in honour, does not remain; He is like the beasts that perish.”*

Psalm 49 is the musical counterpart to Ecclesiastes 2:18-23.

The Psalmist observes that the wealthy man's 'inner thought' his unexamined assumption is that his houses will last forever.

He names his lands after himself, the ancient equivalent of putting his name on the building, confident the name will outlast him.

The Preacher has examined that assumption under laboratory conditions and found it false.

No human achievement outlasts the life of the achiever in any ultimate sense.

The name on the building fades faster than anyone expects; ask any tour guide how many visitors recognise the name carved over the door.

*But here is the revelation that transfigures this whole passage: Jesus builds differently. 'On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it' (**Matthew 16:18**).*

What the Preacher could not build a work that outlasts death, that cannot be inherited by a fool, that cannot be unravelled by the next generation Jesus builds. The community of faith, built on the confession of Christ, is the only institution in human history explicitly guaranteed against the destruction the Preacher so feared. Solomon's temple, the physical building, was destroyed twice. The church Jesus builds cannot be, because its foundation is not a dynasty of fallible successors but the risen Christ himself, who does not die and therefore does not need an heir to

protect what he has built.

V. The First 'Nothing Better.' The Gift of Ordinary Life.

Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, *"Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labour. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. ²⁵For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? ²⁶For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind."*

After the relentless exposure of **hebel**, this is the first ray of genuine light in the whole book, and it is both surprising and profound.

The Preacher, who has just dismissed wisdom, pleasure, and work as vapour, now commends the simplest possible pleasures:

- Eating,
- Drinking,
- Enjoying the fruits of your daily work.

What has changed?

Not the activities themselves, Solomon ate and drank throughout the entire failed experiment of chapter 2.

What changed is the source- *'From the hand of God.'*

- The same food that is *hebel* when consumed as an ultimate meaning-provider becomes a genuine good when received as a gift from God's hand.
- The same work that is vapour when done for legacy or status becomes a legitimate joy when done as stewardship before God.

Nothing about the meal changed.

Everything about the posture toward the meal changed from grasping to receiving, from demanding the meal answer a question it was never built to answer, to simply thanking the Giver for it.

This is an enormously practical distinction, worth sitting with for a moment.

Two people can eat the identical meal tonight.

- One eats it as a small, silent transaction with no one food goes in, hunger goes down, nothing more is asked of it, and underneath that silence a quiet demand: 'let this be enough to make today feel worthwhile.'
- The other eats the same meal as a gift, received with a thank-you directed somewhere toward the God who sends rain on the field the wheat grew in.

Same plate.

Same flavour.

- One meal is *hebel*.
- The other is worship.

1 Timothy 6:17, *"Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy."*

Paul's instruction to Timothy is a New Testament commentary on **Ecclesiastes 2:24–26**.

God '*gives us richly all things to enjoy*' not merely to use, but to enjoy.

This is worth noticing because a certain kind of severe, joyless religion has convinced many sincere Christians that enjoyment itself is spiritually suspect, that the truly devoted life is the grim one.

Paul says the opposite. ***Enjoyment, rightly directed, is not a distraction from devotion.*** It is a form of it.

The enjoyment of God's gifts is itself an act of worship, an acknowledgment that the Giver is good, that the gift is good, and that the relationship between the Giver and the receiver is good.

A meal eaten in genuine thanksgiving is not a lesser thing than a sermon or a prayer meeting. It can be, in its quiet way, just as much an act of worship.

The revolutionary reorientation of **2:24–26** is this, **you do not need to achieve something extraordinary to have a meaningful life.**

You need to receive something ordinary from the hand of God with full attention and full gratitude.

The most ordinary meal, eaten in thanksgiving, is a more profound act of worship than the most spectacular achievement built for self-glorification.

This is genuinely good news for the overwhelming majority of us who will never build an empire, compose a symphony, or found sixty monasteries.

The door to meaning was never through extraordinary achievement. It was always through ordinary gratitude. That door is open to every person in this room today, regardless of what is or is not in your bank account.

Conclusion

♦ The Man Who Stopped Building — Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux was the **most influential man in twelfth-century Europe**.

He advised popes, settled theological controversies that split the church, launched the Second Crusade with a single sermon so persuasive that men wept and enlisted on the spot, and **founded over sixty monasteries across the continent**.

By any measure available to his contemporaries, he was **the most productive Christian leader of his age**, a Solomon of the medieval church, if there ever was one.

In his final years, he wrote to his friend **William of St. Thierry**: *'I have spent all my years in labours and conflicts. My life has been consumed in worrying about others and in cares for the church. I have forgotten to give myself the quietness, which was my birthright as a human being, made for rest in God. Now I am old, and I am tired, not with the good tiredness of a day well spent, but with the exhaustion of a man who built much and rested never.'*

He was living **Ecclesiastes 2:17–23** the anguish of the builder who looks up from his work and finds that the work has consumed him rather than serving him.

Read that letter again and you will hear Solomon's own voice underneath it: 'I hated all my labour.'

But Bernard did not end there. In **his last months**, he returned to what the Preacher calls 'nothing better' long periods of silence before God, simple meals with the brothers, the quiet liturgy of the Hours sung at the same times every single day, whether he felt like singing them or not. He stopped trying to out-build death and started simply receiving each ordinary day from God's hand.

He said at the end: *'I know now what I was made for. Not for the building, but for the Builder.'*
'From the hand of God' (2:24).

That is the secret.

Everything received from God's hand, even the ordinary, is full of meaning. Everything built for one's own hand however magnificent is vapour.

So where does that leave us, three thousand years after Solomon closed his notebook, and eight hundred years after Bernard wrote his letter?

It leaves us here: **every one of us is currently running some version of the Royal Experiment.**

Maybe your laboratory is a career.

Maybe it is a relationship you have quietly decided must complete you.

Maybe it is a body you are sculpting, a platform you are building, a portfolio you are growing, a reputation you are protecting.

Whatever it is, Solomon has already run your experiment for you, with more resources than you will ever have, and he has published the results: it is hebel. Vapour. Real while you hold it, gone the moment you try to close your fist around it.

That is not a call to abandon your work, your pleasures, or your ambitions. Solomon did not retreat to a cave. He kept building, kept ruling, kept eating and drinking to the end of his life.

The call is to relocate the source.

Stop asking your career, your relationships, your achievements, or your pleasures to be the ground beneath your feet.

They were never built to bear that weight, and every one of them will eventually confess, honestly, that they cannot.

Let God be the ground instead, and receive the career, the relationship, the meal, and the ordinary Tuesday afternoon

as gifts from his hand rather than as answers you extracted from your own effort.

That is the difference between Solomon's despair in chapter 2 and Solomon's peace in verse 24.

Same king.
Same wealth.
Same pleasures.

- One posture asks creation to be god.
- The other receives creation from God.

May we, today, choose the second.

Study Questions

Question	Discussion Focus
The Preacher brought wisdom to the pleasure experiment; he was not reckless. How does his controlled, intelligent approach to pleasure make his conclusion more, rather than less, trustworthy?	<i>The rigour of the experiment — epistemological weight.</i>
Jesus tells his disciples not to seek after food and drink 'as the nations of the world' do, but to seek the Kingdom of God first (Luke 12:29–31). How does this reframe Solomon's failed pleasure experiment in Ecclesiastes 2:1–11? What would it look like practically to	<i>Reordering desire. The Father who already knows your needs.</i>

'seek the Kingdom first' in an area where you are currently seeking comfort or pleasure as an end in itself?	
Solomon's legacy was destroyed by Rehoboam within two years. What does this tell us about the difference between building for God and building for self?	<i>Legacy and stewardship. Matthew 16:18 as the contrast.</i>
The 'nothing better' passages commend ordinary enjoyment. What in your ordinary daily life could you receive more consciously as a gift from God's hand?	<i>Sanctification of the ordinary. Practical application.</i>
Paul says the world's wisdom failed to find God (1 Corinthians 1:21). Where in your life are you relying on human intelligence to do what only revelation can do?	<i>The limits of education and reason as spiritual resources.</i>
Ecclesiastes 2:24 says God 'gives wisdom and knowledge and joy' to those who are good in His sight. What is the connection between our moral posture before God and our capacity to enjoy His gifts?	<i>The condition of joy. The fear of God as the prerequisite of genuine contentment.</i>