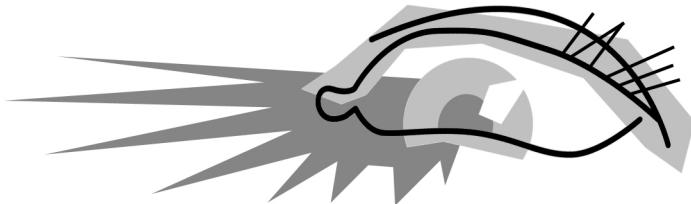


“All That My Eyes Desired”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Prov. 3:13-28, Ecclesiastes 2.*

Memory Text: “For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?” (*Ecclesiastes 2:22, NKJV*).

“I have pursued, alas, philosophy,
Jurisprudence, and medicine,
And, help me God, theology,
With fervent zeal through thick and thin.
And here, poor fool, I stand once more,
No wiser than I was before.”

—Johann Goethe, *Faust* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 12.

Sounds as if Faust didn't find his pursuit of knowledge any more satisfying than Solomon did. Even the study of theology, if not done with a humble and seeking heart, leads nowhere.

And though Solomon, unlike Goethe's *Faust*, didn't openly sell his soul to the devil in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment, he might as well have, considering how far he fell. Fortunately for Solomon, Jesus stooped even lower, becoming “sin for us” (*2 Cor. 5:21*) in order that He could lift even the lowest of us from the degradation of sin.

This week we pick up on more of Solomon's words regarding this general frustration with life; that is, a life lived apart from God. If we heed his words carefully, there will be some valuable lessons for us. Why make the same mistakes he did?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 20.

Striving After Wind

Chapter 1 ended with Solomon bemoaning all the wisdom and knowledge he had acquired over the years (*Eccles. 1:16-18*). For him it all was meaningless, a striving after wind. How sad that he should end up with these sentiments when the Bible more than once talked about how people marveled at the wisdom of his earlier years (*1 Kings 10:1-8; see also 1 Kings 4:29-34*).

Compare the attitude of Solomon toward wisdom with the attitude he displayed earlier, such as in Proverbs 3:13-26. What do you think made the difference?

Solomon, old and bitter, had lost his way; hence, all the knowledge and wisdom he acquired meant little to him. In contrast, the wisdom he talks about in Proverbs is a wisdom centered on a knowledge of God, the source of all true wisdom and knowledge. This point is brought home even more powerfully when Solomon links knowledge and understanding with God as the Creator (*Prov. 3:19*), which proves again how the foundation of all knowledge and wisdom begins with Him. Notice, too, that this wisdom isn't just abstract theological concepts regarding the nature of God or the limits of omnipotence. Instead, in these verses in Proverbs we can see a practical element. True wisdom will be reflected in how we live our lives. Solomon, as he lost his way, lost the true wisdom he once had, and he found, instead, only the worldly kind, the kind under the sun. Hence, in his mind it all became vain, meaningless, even a source of pain.

Though there's a chapter break, a logical progression of thought flows from the last verses of chapter 1 to the first few verses of chapter 2. Read Ecclesiastes 1:16–2:3. What is Solomon talking about now?

How typical of human beings to go from one worldly pursuit to another, all in a vain attempt to find happiness and fulfillment. What's been your own experience in trying to find worldly happiness? Why does it never work? Why can it never work?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** Ecclesiastes 2:22

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Worldly diversions are not the key.

Feel: Contentment in valuing the things of God over the things of the world.

Do: Evaluate our aspirations and possessions in terms of their lasting or eternal significance.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. The Search for Wisdom and Knowledge and Leaving a Legacy (Eccles. 1:16-18, 2:3)

A Read Ecclesiastes 1:16. To whom was Solomon comparing himself? Why is it dangerous to use others as a standard to measure ourselves?

B Whether it's scratching our initials in a batch of wet cement, putting our signature on a work of art, or endowing a scholarship fund, most of us want to leave a legacy for future generations. What legacy is most consistent with Christian values? Why?

II. The Pitfalls of Pleasure (Eccles. 2:1, 2)

A While God wishes for us to find joy in life, the never-ending quest for pleasure reveals an imbalance that does not suit us for life in the real world. Read Matthew 6:25-34. How does this passage relate to our search for pleasure?

B Jesus promised life “to the full” (*John 10:10, NIV*). What did He mean by this, and how are we to obtain it?

► **Summary:** In Jesus dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (*Col. 2:9*). His fullness ensures that we shall have life and have it more abundantly (*John 10:10*), “both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (*Phil. 2:13*).

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, **Why is this lesson important to me?**

C O N T I N U E D 

The Pleasure Principle

Solomon, finding wisdom a vain endeavor, goes after pleasure instead. The constant search for pleasure is called hedonism. Most people who are pleasure seekers are just looking for a good time. Some people, however, truly believe that pleasure is the sum of all good, and whatever is pleasurable is, therefore, also good.

Put yourself in the mind of someone who does not believe in God. According to their thinking, if this life is all there is, if there is nothing beyond it, if there is no moral law that we all are answerable to, then why not just kick back and enjoy yourself in any way you please, even at the expense of others? What answer do you have for someone like this?

Compare what Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 with what he wrote in Proverbs 6:23-29, 7:6-27, 20:1, 23:1-6. How is he, here in Ecclesiastes, expressing the same sentiments that he wrote out years earlier?

There's something incredibly tricky about seeking pleasure just for pleasure's sake. For some reason, when we get it and even enjoy it, sooner or later it doesn't satisfy. Sooner or later the pleasure loses something, or we need more and more of it to reach the same level of immediate satisfaction. Sooner or later we realize that there's much more to life than just pleasure and that pleasure alone leaves us hollow, empty, dissatisfied. This is a lesson that Solomon learned for himself the hard way.

Solomon is a man who, though once warning people about lust, ended up with "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines" (*1 Kings 11:3*); a guy who, though warning against gluttony, eventually would feast like a pig (*1 Kings 4:22, 23*). How easy it is to fall! What lessons can you take away from this fall that should serve as a warning to you?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

“Anything I wanted, I took, and did not restrain myself from any joy,” Solomon reports in Ecclesiastes 2:10, TLB. What does that mean for us today?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: What do I need to know from God’s Word?

Bible Commentary**I. Pleasure-Seeking Blowouts**

Invite someone with The Revised English Bible to read Ecclesiastes 2:10. “Poor me,” whines Solomon. “I worked so hard that I thought I deserved all this pleasure as my reward!”

Consider This: What desires did Solomon gratify at the expense of his subjects’ needs?

Suggested responses:

- His lavish palace, supported by extreme taxation (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 56)
- Women, whose abuse deprived them of normal marriages (*1 Kings 11:3*)
- Buildings by non-Hebrew slaves; his biddings by Hebrew servitude (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1069)

Ever since the Fall, people have devised ways to “live off the other man’s back!” Note how quickly the cleverness began:

- withholding of a fair wage (*Gen. 31:7*)
- slavery (*Exod. 1:13, 14*)
- charging unjust interest (*Neh. 5:7*)
- devouring widows’ houses (*Matt. 23:14*)
- robbing money (piously, “for God!”) set aside by parents for their aged care (*Mark 7:11*)
- overcharging (*Luke 19:8*)

C O N T I N U E D ➔

“All That My Eyes Desired”

One of the most famous, and successful, businessmen in American history was Lee Iacocca, who ran the giant Chrysler Corporation for many years. Toward the end of his life, he once said, “Here I am in the twilight years of my life, still wondering what it’s all about. . . . I can tell you this, fame and fortune is for the birds.”

Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. What’s the basic point of his message here?

Solomon gained a certain satisfaction from his material prosperity (*Eccles. 2:10*) but, in the end, the satisfaction did not last, did not fulfill the most basic longings of his soul (*vs. 11*). If material possessions could bring happiness, Solomon should have been the happiest person in the world. As you read Ecclesiastes, you can see that these are not the words of a happy man.

Read again Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. What things did Solomon acquire?

See also 1 Kings 7 and 1 Kings 10:10-29.

Why, though, with so much, was he still not happy?

All that Solomon had were physical things; all his physical desires were satiated. Yet, as human beings, we are more than the sum of our organs and flesh. There’s a spiritual, moral component to us that all the physical things in the world cannot satisfy. Solomon was proof of that. It’s interesting, too, that even in the so-called “developed” world, in which people have wealth and material prosperity, the levels of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life are sometimes even higher than nations in which the people have less.

Read Matthew 6:33. How could this great truth have solved Solomon’s problem? What does the text say to you amid your own temptations?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

II. Wisdom, Fools, and Folly

Solomon does not suffer fools gladly. In Ecclesiastes 2, he begins offering definitions of fools:

Verse 14 Fools walk in [blind] darkness.

Verse 19 Fools are probably poor rulers.

(The teacher might here begin to build a cumulative list of all Solomon's upcoming "fool" descriptors over the quarter: Eccles. 4:5; 5:1, 3, 4; 6:8; 7:4-6, 9; 10:2, 3, 12, 14.)

In spite of his behavior and regrets, Solomon stops short of calling himself a fool! Seven veiled references to "folly" in Ecclesiastes are as close as he comes. Though Solomon publicly confessed, his book doesn't ring quite like his father David's "I have sinned." Even in Solomon's reference to "an old and foolish king," he stops short of naming himself (*Eccles. 4:13*).

"Folly" may indicate "'that which may lead to sin,' without actually being sinful in itself . . . Solomon sought these experiences . . . with a view to learning by experience . . . but without allowing them to master him." —*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1068.

This meaning is consistent with Solomon's tale in chapter 2 verse 3: "I decided to try the road of drink, while still holding steadily to my course of seeking wisdom" (TLB).

Picture Solomon "living on the edge," monitoring, knowing exactly how much he could sip without getting drunk. Some other areas of his folly, however, tell another story.

III. Turns on Life

Now, because Solomon is a king not in control, he turns into a king out of control, hating life. Why? Where has he lost control?

First, Solomon has no power over death. In this, kings are treated no better than fools! And who will even care? (*See Eccles. 2:15, 16; 8:8.*)

Consider This: Solomon knew about the resurrection. So why does he not mention it? Why doesn't he mention hope?

Second, Solomon is reacting to having been told that, except for one tribe, the kingdom will be rent from his line. How strange that, having just acknowledged his own folly, he is raging that someone—who may just be a fool—will get all that he has accomplished (*Eccles. 1:18*).

C O N T I N U E D 

The Fate of a Fool

“Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?’ I said in my heart, ‘This too is meaningless’ ” (Eccles. 2:15, NIV).

Solomon is having a hard time. All his wisdom, he believed, did him no good. He then sought after pleasure and mirth and found it empty. And then, even being perhaps the richest man in all antiquity didn’t satisfy the innermost needs of his soul. He found it all “vanity and striving after wind” (vs. 11, NASB).

As if all these weren’t bad enough, it gets worse.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:12-17. What is he complaining about now? How valid are his complaints? How can you, as a Christian, answer him?

Jesus said something that in a close way relates to what Solomon is saying here. Talking about the Father, Jesus said, “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). In another place, after talking about some Galileans whose “blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1), Jesus then said: “‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ ” (Luke 13:2, 3, NKJV; see also verses 4, 5). In both these places Jesus is talking about what seems obvious to all of us: that pain and suffering aren’t just the lot of the wicked. The good suffer as well. The difference is that Solomon, seeing this fact, believes that everything we do is useless because we all, the fool and the wise, wind up dead. Jesus, though, comes to a different conclusion: “‘Unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ ” (NKJV). Jesus was pointing them to something beyond the immediate fate of either the wicked or the just.

How does your faith in God help you deal with the nondiscriminatory reach of death? What Bible promises offer you the greatest hope in the context of the inevitability of the grave?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

■ Solomon knew that God Himself had named the king's successor. Had it been Solomon's own son, might Solomon have been calmed? Earthly kings desire "my son" to inherit the kingship. Why does the earthly king have a responsibility to regard "my son" equally as just one among all of God's children?

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: How can I practice the information I just learned?

Thought Questions:

- ① A husband told his wife why he hadn't dated her roommate in academy: "Because she didn't have any more self-control than I did." Do I lean on someone who carries responsibility well so that I am freed up to live the "desirous life"?
- ② Like Solomon—risking his wisdom while cliff-teetering on the brink of drink—in what area(s) of my life am I "living on the edge"?

Application Questions:

- ① Consider that in life's give-and-take, none of us get all of our needs filled. We are fortunate to reach perhaps 80 percent. Indeed, the closer we approach 100 percent, the more we drop meeting the needs of others around us to, say, 60 percent.
- ② Next, my desires appear! Do they come before others' needs? (Example: If the washing machine and television both quit in a financially challenged home, which appliance would a sports addict get repaired first?)
- ③ Ask your class to conduct a family council at home to determine which family needs are best met, which are lacking, and beyond that, what desires are longed for. Suggest that the items be prioritized.

Witnessing

If we are guilty of unfair exchanges with people for "pieces of (their) life" in the workplace/market, will those offended ever want to hear about our faith in God?

C O N T I N U E D ➔

Legacy

Solomon doesn't know when to give up. It's bad enough that all his worldly pursuits came to nothing; it's bad enough that everyone, the wise and the fool, dies; but now he's complaining about what happens even *after* he dies.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-26. What's his complaint here?

Solomon does have a good point. People are concerned about their legacy, whatever it is. How depressing to think that you work so hard all your life to build up something, only to have someone come after and bring it all to nothing. In one sense, too, his concern is kind of ironic: After all, considering the life that Solomon lived after he assumed the throne, one might wonder what his father David would have thought about what Solomon did with what David had left him. On the other hand, perhaps it was that very thought that got him thinking about what his heirs would do with their inheritance.

Read verses 24-26. What is Solomon saying now?

Though the texts themselves are difficult, Solomon seems to be saying now, *Well, since there's nothing I can do about what my heirs do, I might as well live life well now.* He's not advocating licentiousness, however (he's been there and done that already); instead, he seems to be following the Bible idea that life, lived in harmony with God's will, can bring many earthly blessings that include physical enjoyment: "He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart" (*Ps. 104:14, 15, NKJV*).

You're an heir (*Rom. 8:17, Gal. 3:29, 4:7*), receiving from your heavenly Father the greatest gift possible, salvation in Jesus Christ (*Heb. 9:28, 1 Pet. 1:5*). What kind of daily choices are you making to help ensure that you don't squander this "legacy" left to you by God through the death of Jesus in your stead?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

Living-off-the-backs-of-others schemes in our day may involve even the “status quo laborer”: involvement in pyramids, sharp investments, deceptive contracts or sales (real estate, autos, etc.), abuse of time shares, frivolous malpractice lawsuits, stockholders living off of our health-care insurance.

Also, *The SDA Bible Commentary* exegetes the eighth commandment for CEOs (chief executive officers):

“Employers steal when they withhold from their employees the benefits they promised, or allow their wages to fall into arrears, or force them to work overtime without proper remuneration, or deprive them of any other consideration they have a reasonable right to expect.”—Vol. 1, p. 606.

What eventually happens to the earthly riches, those acquired by the backs of others? One possibility comes from *Last Day Events*:

“The earth’s crust will be rent by the outbursts of the elements concealed in the bowels of the earth. These elements, once broken loose, will sweep away the treasures of those who for years have been adding to their wealth by securing large possessions at starvation prices from those in their employ.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, pp. 25, 26.

Consider This: In witnessing to the offended, can we point them to the only One who will change extortion? (*Read James 5:4 and Isaiah 62:8, 9.*)

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

“Coming up empty” was not copyrighted by Solomon: To minimize calories, a mother for years drank a white grape diet soda that boasted no caffeine, no sodium, no sugar. It sounded as user-healthy as it was enticing. These claims intrigued her teenage daughter to read the listed ingredients. The zero claims continued in the nutrition column: Protein-0, Carbohydrates-0, Fat-0. And then she came to a number. “Mom!” she squealed. “The only thing in here is servings! See, right here: servings, 2.6!” Just as the artificial sweetener will shortly make one thirsty for water again, Amos and Paul knew all about empty servings as well. Invite someone to read Amos 8:11, 12 and 2 Timothy 3:5, 7.

Consider This: With his “been there, done that” warning, will you open your heart to let Solomon beg you to “Do as I say, not as I did”?

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 422; *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 364; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 258.

“He [Solomon] gives us the history of his search for happiness. He engaged in intellectual pursuits; he gratified his love for pleasure; he carried out his schemes of commercial enterprise. He was surrounded by the fascinating splendor of court life. . . .

“Solomon sat upon a throne of ivory, the steps of which were of solid gold, flanked by six golden lions. His eyes rested upon highly cultivated and beautiful gardens just before him. These grounds were visions of loveliness. . . . Birds of every variety of brilliant plumage flitted from tree to tree, making the air vocal with sweet songs. Youthful attendants, gorgeously dressed and decorated, waited to obey his slightest wish. Scenes of revelry, music, sports, and games were arranged for his diversion at an extravagant expenditure of money.

“But . . . Dissipation had left its impress upon his once fair and intellectual face. . . . His brow was furrowed with care and unhappiness. . . .

“His shattered nerves and wasted frame showed the result of violating Nature’s laws. He confessed to a wasted life, an unsuccessful chase after happiness.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 167.

Discussion Questions:

- ① A university professor once remarked to a Seventh-day Adventist student, “I don’t need your Jesus. I am famous, I have a good home, I have a good job. What do you have that I don’t have?” As a class, discuss what you would answer.
- ② As a class, talk about some modern-day Solomon, some rich and famous person seeming to have it all who, in the end, reveals just how miserable his or her life has been. What lessons can you learn?
- ③ Talk about your own experiences with desiring worldly things, only to get them and realize that, in the end, they didn’t give you the happiness and satisfaction that you had expected. What advice might you give to some young person who is in hot pursuit of riches?