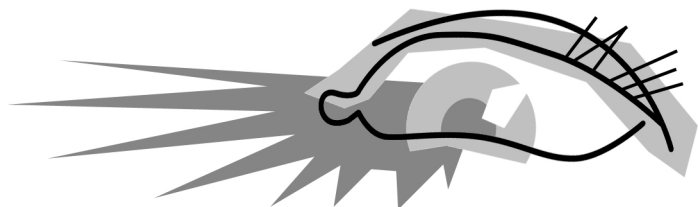


“All That My Eyes Desired”



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?

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?

“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?

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?

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?**

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:

- ❶ 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.
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?

Finding God's Message of Love

by SOFIA BARAHONA

While walking through the market one day, Sofia saw a friend talking to another couple. Her friend introduced Sofia, and the four talked easily. The recent hurricane that had ravaged their country, Honduras, was on everyone's mind. The heavy rains had damaged Sofia's house and ruined many of her possessions. Sofia wondered whether the hurricane had been a message from God. So, when the couple turned the conversation to God, Sofia listened with interest. Her new friends saw her interest and offered to study the Bible with her. Sofia eagerly agreed.

The couple visited Sofia and studied the Bible with her. Soon she began attending church with them on Sabbath. Her teacher's mind helped her appreciate the in-depth Bible study Adventists enjoyed. Sofia wanted to follow Jesus in baptism. She was relieved when her husband did not object to the changes in their lives that her new faith brought.

Sofia became an active soul winner. In her school system it is legal to talk about religion, and Sofia encourages her young students to sing a song or pray in class. Sometimes students stop after school to talk to her about God, and she invites them to visit the little church that meets in their town. Recently the church held evangelistic meetings, and Sofia invited the students to bring their parents.

Sofia is an active leader in a small group that meets in her town. She loves to share God's love with others, just as her friends shared God's love with her. She studies the Bible with anyone who is interested.

Sofia looks forward to retiring from teaching soon. "There's too much to do," she says. "I want to spend time with my family and do more missionary work. I will have more time to work for God when I retire." To Sofia, her family is her first mission field. One of her children has been baptized, and another is preparing for baptism. Her prayer is that her husband and older children will see the beauty of life in Jesus.

Mission offerings helped bring Sofia to Christ and establish the new group of believers in her town. They continue to provide materials that Sofia uses to lead others to Jesus' feet.



SOFIA BARAHONA (left) shares God's love in El Chimbo, Honduras.