

Solomon's Twelve Secrets

Session 2: Solomon's Bad News Is Good News For Us!

Edited Transcript

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Good morning, men. Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter two. The reason that I always say that first is I want to send the signal that this is a Bible study and the primacy of God's word is what we're really focused on. As we begin our message today, let's do a shout out. Today goes to Maurice Reformed Men's Group in Maurice, Iowa. By the way, men there in Maurice, my grandfather was the mayor of Arnolds Park, Iowa, and my grandfather grew up in Arnolds Park, Iowa. I was looking at the map this morning. It's maybe an hour away, something like that. Stacy Jasper is the leader. It's a brand new group. They're going to be meeting on Sundays after their worship service at 10:45 AM. Stacy writes, "Our group is just starting. We are praying for a great group of committed guys to help grow, disciple, and reach out to more men." What a great vision. Would you join me in welcoming Stacy and the Maurice Reformed Men's Group to Man in the Mirror Men's Bible Study? Yeah. One, two, three, hoorah. Welcome, guys. We are honored to have you as part of our Bible study.

The series today, Solomon's 12 Secrets: Lessons on Life From Ecclesiastes. We're on the second of these secrets. The title of today's message: Solomon's Bad News is Good News For Us. For those of who were not here, and as a reminder to those of you who were, in the first chapter, we've already seen the task that Solomon committed himself to and the conclusion he reached. The task was to explore and study by wisdom all that is done under was it heaven or the sun? Under heaven. To study brings to mind the idea of rational thought. To explore brings to mind empirical observations, going out and finding things. As I commented last time, Solomon was a scientist. On another occasion, we can go into more detail about that, but that was his task. He wanted to study and explore what was done under the heaven. Then, his conclusion that he came to was his opening line in the book, "Meaningless. Meaningless. Everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

Our big idea for the first week or the first secret was that "Apart from God, life has no meaning". He basically, in the first chapter, demolished any argument that you would be able to find meaning apart from God. Now in the second chapter, he's basically saying here, "Let me tell you how I arrived at this conclusion."

SOLOMON'S BOLD EXPERIMENTS TO FIND SOMETHING WORTHWHILE

The first thing we want to look at today are Solomon's bold experiments to find something worthwhile. Look with me in chapter two at verse three. He says, "I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly. My mind's still guiding me with wisdom." Then, look. He says, "I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives." What is the question that is the underlying motivation for Solomon to write this book to us? It says that he wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days that they have been given.

This word, worthwhile, it will show up in other places presented in synonyms, but let me go ahead and tell you now other ways that this Hebrew word is translated other than worthwhile. Agreeable, meaning, satisfying, pleasing, good, these are some of the ways. He wanted to find out what was good for men to do. He wanted to find out what was satisfying for men to do. He wanted to find out what was agreeable for men to do. He wanted to find out what was better for men to do. He wanted to find out what is it that is worthwhile for a man to do. The thing that is unique about the passage we're about to study is that you have here ... I mean, lots of men would like to find out what's worthwhile to do, but you and I, we're limited. We're limited by how much wisdom and intellect we have. We're limited by our resources. We're limited by many different things, but Solomon had more going for him than any other man we've ever known about in history.

He was the wisest man who ever lived except for Jesus. People came from all around the known world just to marvel at his wisdom. The Queen of Sheba said of him, she said, "They told me about your wisdom, but they only told me the half of it. You're so wonderful," and on and on. He was the richest man who ever lived in that era, rich beyond measure. He was the poet laureate of his country. He was the Nobel Prize winner for peace. He was the CEO of the largest corporation in the world. He was a shipping magnate. He was a great merchant. He was the greatest real estate developer, Trump notwithstanding, he was the greatest real estate developer ever, the projects that he built. He had unlimited resources, unlimited wisdom, and he decided to bring all of that prowess to bear on this question. What is it that is worthwhile for a man to do?

Now, we're reading in chapter two. If I had been putting the chapter numbers in here, I would have put it above verse 16 in chapter one, so let's actually start there. Chapter one verse 16, he's trying to figure out what's worthwhile. He said, "Okay, I thought to myself, 'Look, I've grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone has ruled over Jerusalem before.'" That was the point I was making. "I've experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then, I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and of madness and folly, but I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind." Then, he said, "Wisdom didn't work out for me. Wisdom's meaningless." Well, where have we heard that before? You don't have to turn there, but if you want to write it down, let me just read to you from 1 Corinthians chapter one verse 19, "For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. The intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" This is what Solomon discovered, 1 Corinthians chapter one verses 19 and 20.

Then, he's scratching his head. He says, "Okay. Okay. Okay. Let me run another experiment. I tried wisdom, didn't work out. Let me try another experiment." Chapter two verse one, so, scratching his head, "I thought in my heart, 'Come now. I will test you with pleasure.'" Wisdom didn't work so his next experiment is pleasure. "I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." Now, this word, good, this is the same Hebrew word as worthwhile. It's all the same thing, just different ways of saying the same thing. "I wanted to find out what is worthwhile," if you will, but good. "But that also proved to be," what? Meaningless. "Laughter, I said, is foolish." You guys shouldn't be laughing at me so much. "Laughter is foolish. What does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind guiding me with wisdom." That didn't work out, pleasure.

Then, the sentence that we looked at before where he's telling us why he was doing all this. "I wanted to see what was worthwhile," again, good, pleasing, agreeable, "for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives." He's done two experiments so far, wisdom, pleasure, and then, "I wonder what else I can do. I know what I'll do." Verse four, "I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself, big,

giant mansions, biggest mansions ever, and I planted vineyards." He was some kind of a farmer or I don't know what the right word is but something. "I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them." He was involved in all kinds of horticultural endeavors. There might be the possibility some of these parks were for public use. Who knows? "I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves," because slavery was part of their culture, "and had other slaves who were born in my house." Slaves, by the way, then were very different than the way we understand slavery. Another talk for another time.

"I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me." He had this huge cattle ranch or whatever it was or sheep ranch maybe. I don't know. "Then, I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers." What he's saying is he said, "I was able to become the most important, successful, significant, well-known person in my entire nation." Oh, and by the way, he's also the president of the country as well. Then, he says another way, another experiment. He said, "I had a harem as well, the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far," this is what I was trying to say. This is what he says, actually, "I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this, my wisdom stayed with me." He amassed great wealth. He completed great projects. He engaged in all kinds of carnal pleasures. He had a thousand concubines, a thousand women. I mean, wow. For some of you guys, that probably is like the cat's meow, right? Okay, Peaches. You can come in now.

Here is his critical review in verse 10. He says, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and that was the reward for all my labor. Yet, when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was," what? "Meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun." What does a man get for all of his toil? He gets pain and grief by day and, as you'll see, he also gets tossing and turning by night. Verse 12, "Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly just as light is better than darkness. The wise man has eyes in his head while the fool walks in darkness, but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. 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.' For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered. In days to come, both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die, so I hated my life."

Can you imagine? Solomon has tried to prove or find out what it is that's worthwhile for you and I to do in the few days of our lives. What has happened here, what he has ended up proving is that happiness does not come from merely getting what you want. Happiness will never come merely from getting what you want. He's got a message for us. You can't beat the system. You can't gain the system to somehow find satisfaction or something that's worthwhile apart from God. The big idea the first week: "Apart from God, life has no meaning". The genius of this chapter is the compression of the truth into just these few sentences where he covers all of these different earthly avenues that we pursue to try to find meaning and purpose and something that's worthwhile. It's a tour de force. He systematically debunks the argument that you can find any kind of satisfaction apart from God. He says, "So I hated my life because the work," verse 17, "that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun."

You know, if you've been around any number of successful people ... You know, I've always said that the poor have an advantage over the rich because they can still cling to the illusion that money will make them happy, but anybody who's ever had money knows that this is true. Once you acquire the thing you

thought was going to make you happy, you will eventually realize that it's grievous to you. Money is actually a burden. You know, once you get above a certain level, the message here and elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, once you get above a certain level, money actually creates more problems than it solves, but I am getting a little ahead of myself in the book on that thought.

Verse 18, "I hated all the things that I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet, he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. My heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man can do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days, his work is pain and grief. Even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless." I highlighted all the times he said meaningless so far in chapters one and two. I highlighted it in pink. One, two, three, four, I haven't counted them up yet. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13. 13 times so far. Well, 12 times so far. He says it once more in this chapter, so a dozen times.

We see how it turned out for him. He hated his life. It was all grievous to him. I can remember ... Some of you may remember I used to be a big deal. Once upon a time, I was like this big deal and built buildings. I was a developer. I built lots of buildings around this town, which have worked out very good for the community. One day, I was standing in front of one of our buildings, and I was just trying to get some kind of sense of satisfaction for having built that building. It was like 250,000 square feet of building. It was a big building. I was just sitting there, standing there, rather, just wanting to get some pleasure, some feeling that it was worthwhile, some feeling of satisfaction. I looked at this building. I think it must have been God's grace, but I could not connect that to any kind of personal satisfaction. It was just like grievous to me that I had even done that. I became a lot more grievous later when the market turned down too, but anyway, that's another story for another day.

Solomon has proved that happiness does not come merely from getting what you want because he got it all, and it was grievous to him. Here's my question for you. What is the thing that you are working for that you feel will be worthwhile enough to make you happy? What is the thing that you're working for that you feel, at this point, is so worthwhile that that will make you happy? If you would, just imagine, I should have brought one in, but just imagine up here a blank picture frame, gold filigree, just whatever, just a beautiful gold picture frame, empty. What's the picture that you would put in that frame of the thing that would be so worthwhile to you that, at this point, you're convinced will make you happy? What Solomon wants us to know, that anything other than that which emanates from our faith in God is going to be empty, empty, empty, meaningless, futile, vanity, frustration. That's his message to us.

Who's pumped up now? We're going to turn a corner here. However, the Big Idea for the day is this. **"If you get exactly what you want, you still will not be happy without God"**. Even if you get exactly what you put in this picture frame, you still will not be happy without God. Then, let's turn the corner, and let's take a look at ...

SOLOMON CASTS A HOPEFUL VISION FOR FINDING SOMETHING WORTHWHILE

Solomon really does cast a very hopeful vision now for finding something worthwhile. You know, part of great communication, and this book is great communication to me, it's arresting attention and then it's creating a sense of gravitas, feeling the weight of the problem so much. In fact, I just thought of this. I

haven't thought of this in a long time, but Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God ... Jonathan, did I say Winters? Edwards, Jonathan Edwards, okay, yeah. I can say Jonathan Winters delivered that sermon.

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Jonathan Edwards was the person whose preaching started the first Great Awakening in America. When he preached that sermon, he literally read it from a manuscript. When he was done, people were crying out. They were crying out, "Tell us. What must we do to be saved?" But he developed an excruciating detail, the gravity of the problem of a man apart from God, exactly what Solomon is doing. He talked about like being a spider dangling from a single thread over a fire, about to fall into the fire, and many other things that he said just like Solomon had said. What Solomon has done is he's done you a favor here by making you feel so gloomy about this. He's done you a favor because he's creating the gravitas that we need so that when he does give this hopeful vision, that will be more meaningful to us. Let's look at it.

Verse 24, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction with his work." By the way, this word, satisfaction, yes, it's the same Hebrew word worthwhile. He's asking the question, "What is worthwhile for a man to do?" Now he's answering the question, "A man can do nothing better," that's the same word too. "A man can do nothing more worthwhile than to eat and drink and find satisfaction or to find something worthwhile in his work. This too I see is from the hand of God." Now, what does he mean? "This too is from the hand of God." Well, do you remember, if you were here, you would remember maybe, and if you were not, I'm going to tell you. In the first chapter, there was one other thing that was from the hand of God. "What a heavy burden God has laid on men, the futility of all." Now, we see that the good thing, this grace that God gives, it's from the hand of God. "This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him, who can eat and find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him or to the man who does worthwhile things, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness." You see it? "To the man who pleases God, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness."

You may be aware but, in some circles today, the word happiness really gets trashed because, well, there are a lot of reasons for it. People don't like the word happiness, but my point is the word happiness is in the Bible. Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water. God is interested in our happiness. Happiness is the residue of holiness, but that doesn't mean that he's not interested in our happiness. He is more interested in the success of our character than the success of our circumstances, most certainly, but he is very interested in the success of our circumstances. He just gets at it through building our character. Then, just to finish up. You know, I don't often read a whole chapter with you. Did you know that? Very rarely do I read a whole chapter, but I read all of chapter one with you, and we've read all of chapter two.

"But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." All right. This is against the backdrop of the Big Idea. **"If you get exactly what you want, you'll still not be happy without God"**. If that's the case, then, you know, the final thing is: How do we take hold of this worthwhile life?

HOW DO WE TAKE HOLD OF THIS WORTHWHILE LIFE?

Two things: be content and please God. What does it say? What is his vision? "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This is from the hand of God." If you're not content and you can change your situation, go ahead and do that, but I will tell you that there's a greater secret to contentment. That is not getting what you want but wanting what you get, just figuring

out how to want what you already have, just to be satisfied, to be content with what you have, with the lot that you've been cast in life. Then, the second thing is to please him.

How do we please God? What do you have to do to please God? You have to believe in the one he has sent. Hebrews 11, look at Hebrews 11 verse six, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God." Faith is how we please God. Most people would read this text and think, "I forgot to do this for God. I need to do that for God. I need to sign up for that. I need to take this person there. I need to give this money there. I need to be sure I'm at this place at this certain time." In other words, most people would read this, most men, and think that it has to do with somehow me performing to make God happy. That's not what this is about. It's the gospel of Jesus. Some would see Ecclesiastes as this dour, negative book.

I see a passage that is pulsating with optimism, a man who says, "I want to spare you all the sorrows that I've gone through, and I'm going to write this book so that you can be spared the sorrows that I've gone through." He wants us to know today, and he showed us in overweening specificity today, if you get exactly what you want, you will still not be happy without God. Let's pray. Our dearest Father, humbly we come to you. We pray that you would tutor your word to our hearts, that we might see the things that your Spirit wants us to see to be changed in our motivations, in our aspirations, that we would once again remember why we first believed, and if we don't believe or if we have never believed to come to that place to understand that believing in Jesus is the ultimate way that we please you. We ask you this in his powerful and holy name. Amen.