

What's My Pleasure?

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[0 : 00] I would like if you would turn with me for a reading today and study where we're going to look today. At Clusiastes chapter 2, Clusiastes, a wisdom part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and a fascinating book, very up to date, very challenging for the society in which we live.

Quite complex, quite a difficult book in many ways, but full of great wisdom from God and challenging insights.

We're going to read chapter 2 verses 1 to 11 where Solomon, the writer of the book of Clusiastes, is being philosophical with his life and he's trying to find out what makes people happy and what life is about.

Usually when he uses the phrase under the sun, it means he's doing it from the viewpoint of not having God in the picture. So he talks about life under the sun, usually referring to him looking at and thinking about life from the viewpoint of somebody that isn't taking God into the picture and what it means and then comparing it with the truth of God being part of our lives.

So Clusiastes chapter 2, I thought in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good, but that also proved to be meaningless.

[1 : 42] Laugh that I said is foolish and what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly. My mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives, under heaven or under the sun.

I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers and a harem as well, the delights of the heart of man.

I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all of this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure.

[2 : 51] My heart took delight in all my work and this was the reward for all my labour. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Nothing was gained under the sun. I would like to use that as the base point from which to think of the whole concept of pleasure in our lives and what we do with pleasure and why sometimes we find that we are battling with pleasure and with God and who God is.

Maybe I spend a lot of time here talking about the Christian battle and the struggle that we have as Christians and the opposition and the fight and the difficulties and the temptations and maybe that emphasis is imbalanced and we need to look at a different emphasis as well and remind ourselves of the balance of Scripture and of the importance of that balance that we find in Scripture because we know that many people spend their lives trying to find happiness and pleasure without God, don't they?

That's what many people are doing. People are looking for pleasure and searching for pleasure without God and many people are enjoying life without God and are enjoying pleasure without God. I don't subscribe and I don't think the Bible subscribes to the idea that everyone who is living their lives and enjoying their lives is actually deep down inside miserable and unhappy.

[4 : 41] It may well be that they feel that their life is not complete. It may well be that there's somewhere there a search for something different but I'm not convinced that everyone is spending

their lives at least aware of that great God shaped whole that they have been unable to fill.

I think this chapter, this verse kind of touches on that as well. Many would argue that happiness they will look for and find happiness away from God.

The last place they would look for happiness is in a relationship with God or in Christianity or in coming to church or in worship or anything like that. I would imagine that's where most of your friends and neighbours are, most of the people you work with, that would be the thinking of their lives, that they're living for pleasure, they're living for work, they're living for ambition but none of these would involve God at any point.

It's interesting that very often people who are not Christians, people who you might come across in your day to day lives, will, the last thing they will do is equate happiness and pleasure with, or the pursuit of pleasure with the pursuit of God in any way at all.

They would attach the bad things in life to God and they'll blame God for that. It's an interesting caveat, it's an interesting thought that people, that humanity as a whole and we all involve ourselves or we include ourselves in this, we're very quick to blame others.

[6 : 14] We're very quick in the church to blame others, we're very quick in our family to blame others, we're very quick in our lives to blame others and that kind of super level reveals itself a super spiritual event and our willingness to blame God.

So God gets blamed for all the bad things, all the tragedies, all the miseries. God's a killjoy, God's there to stamp down on us and stop us from enjoying life and stop us from having pleasure and all the bad things are God's fault.

But it's interesting that even in an apologetic term or apologetic way as we defend the gospel, why we should ask people why is it that it's only the bad things that God ever gets blamed for?

Why is there not the propensity to thank God for the good things, for the enjoyable things, for the things in life that are amazing that every one of us takes for granted in our lives? That's just by the way.

Where does good come from? If evil is God's fault then there must be some kind of reason for good as well and people need to be challenged about that. But there is in many people's life a relentless pursuit of pleasure and increasingly I think in our western society there's that pursuit of pleasure.

[7 : 29] I'm not sure if we succeed, I'm not sure if we're any happier, we seem to be busier, working harder with less time off but the time off we do have is mental and it's absolutely in pursuit of pleasure because we don't have much time and we've got to have a good time while we're off before we go back to the drudgery of work.

And so there's this kind of tension and turmoil but there is a real pursuit of pleasure and a commentator that I was reading about this book saying that in many ways we're amusing ourselves to death in the society in which we live and that may or may not be true.

But what this section of the chapter does examines in a very challenging way in a way that I'm not sure we would fully understand the life of Solomon in his weighing up of what life is like and what life should be like and what the conclusion of it all is in the end as he comes to.

He is examining a life of undiluted pleasure and self-graphication and work and all that that contains.

It seems he's a high priest in many ways of hedonism here and he's looking to live his life while still guiding himself with wisdom he's looking to see what can life be like without God under the sun but doing all these amazing things wine and folly and all the things that people around me are doing great projects ambition using my gifts and talents making gardens and making parks and planting trees and made reservoirs and having slaves people to look after him and sexual pleasure all the delights of the heart of man everything that he denied himself nothing he was in that position he could deny himself nothing and that's what he did and is the conclusion of it for him at the end of this period was that he everything was meaningless a chasing after nothing was gained after the sun I want to look at that for a few minutes this morning and see what he had.

[9 : 59] The interesting thing is that the under the sun under heaven is his way of describing life without reference to God and that really in many ways is a snapshot of people's ambitions people's thoughts people's lives and people's hopes without God in their lives and there's an interesting there's layers here slightly onion and shrek there's different layers okay and there's two very important layers the first one is that there is pleasure in these things and the second one is that there's ultimate emptiness in it so that's why I say that many people do are enjoying life to a degree because there are pleasure and some of the things he was plunging himself into were not sinful in

and of themselves yeah he was a sinner in his own heart and his desires weren't were deceived but they were not illegitimate pleasures in their own right and what he makes clear is that there are pleasures here and he did enjoy them I denied something I refuse my heart no pleasure my heart took delight in all my work but this was the reward for all my labor in other words it stopped there the pleasure was in the pleasure was in the pleasure and there was nothing beyond it there was no reason for it there was no motive for it there was no thanksgiving to anyone for it it's the reward was simply in the action itself there was nothing beyond that there was no ultimate reason no ultimate motive for it legitimate pleasure can be like that as can illegitimate pleasure sinful pleasure of course is sweet and temptation is is sweet otherwise it wouldn't be temptation so there's a kind of mixture of things going on here there's the there's the the great wise leader here who is a teacher who is recognizing there's legitimate pleasure there's illegitimate pleasure he plunged himself into all of these things he recognized that there was a word in experiencing these things in and of themselves in the moment as it were in the moment you know as many people would say it was great while it lasted but there's hell to pay that's what it's like that's what it's like for many people and there's that great sense in it being okay in the moment but no thought of what is the point of it or what is the ultimate reality or what does it mean for me in my own life and soul and what Solomon comes to where the teacher comes to of course is recognizing that life under the sun is ultimately meaningless a chasing after the wind nothing was gained that's it that is life without God without reference to God we are in a vacuous empty place ultimately and I think that therefore there is a danger for us as Christians when we don't have a true and proper biblical understanding of pleasure and its pursuit and what place it has in our lives and what we should think about it because clearly the Bible doesn't teach that pleasure is wrong it teaches our heart are deceitful and it teaches that there are sinful pleasures but it teaches much more than that and therefore it's important for us as Christians to know and to understand and to think about these things because I think a lot of the time as Christians we're running away from God because we think he's dull and we think he's boring and actually deep down we really want pleasure without him and we think pleasure is illegitimate but it's worth pursuing because at least it's exciting and God's desperately dull he must like medicine you know that horrible green

medicine which we swallow up must be good for us but we don't like the taste of it and I think a lot of us sometimes maybe not in our general or maybe I'm just speaking about myself looking at you all second you're looking horrified so I don't think that maybe it's just me that thinks sometimes but the reality is sometimes I think but the lack of time we spend with God the lack of desire we have for prayer the lack of interest we have in his word that that may be what's reflected in our thinking to a greater or lesser degree we think God's a prose to pleasure we think God is harsh and oppressive and that is from hell itself that thinking is from hell itself it's making a God in Satan's image and it's what we must be aware of and be aware of and we need to watch the deceitfulness of sin not just as it's exposed in the word but in our own hearts we need to think seriously and really be on it look at scripture as a mirror and make it look back at yourself everybody else but look at ourselves and say what it says about ourselves and about the deceitfulness of our heart that needs broken down and recognised principles to govern our pleasure so we come to church and we do church things and we do Christian things and then we've got the rest of our life and there's that sacred secular divide and what happens in the secular side of our lives we don't really evoke and if we don't use Christian principles to govern and to guide what we do we don't really know what God says we don't know ourselves very well and it leads to a great imbalance we're not clear on the biblical truth and we haven't bothered to find out and so it leads to all kinds of difficulties and not least with our understanding of ourselves it leads to very often imbalance in our thinking we can be legalistic secular sorry sacred secular divide struggling need a holiday that's that's when you fuse two words together secularism okay maybe that's a good thing we should think about being secularist but that's the sacred and the secular divide you've got to watch that okay because that's a big problem in our lives it can lead to legalism in one place where it's all about law and doing things on the outside that somehow we think we'll please God or at least a license on the other side where we think oh grace can let us do anything it doesn't matter or a set is in or all kinds of things that are in balance so where does our freedom lie then in pleasure where does our freedom lie in pleasure what place is pleasure in our lives as Christians it's hugely important this pleasure seeking world and all the definitions that may come from it and what are part of it maybe someone wants to let that lead you out you need we need to remember the where where does freedom lie in pleasure well it

lies in having the right foundation and this is the same for everything isn't it it's having the right perspective and knowing who we are knowing who we are and where we've come from so in Genesis chapter one and verse 31 God made his creation and he said God saw all he had made and it was very good all of it was very good and that's an important reminder to us that the creation the world in which we live that God made in its original state was absolutely good absolutely good everything under the sun was good with God as Lord and Creator is God's world and he made it good and the pleasure of looking and seeing and tasting and touching and feeling and being are his pleasures they belong to him he created them he made them he invented them they're his this is his world and it was a good world but what sin has done is sin has brought that great in covering over this world that he created and separated him from us and us from him and introduced death and slavery and brokenness and this world as it is it's no longer good as it was intended to be because he the good one has been removed from its place of centrality and significance and important it's like a world where we're breathing but without oxygen it's not the right place to be and the first principle for us is always to have that barrier between heaven and earth removed so that God is central to all we are and all we do again and that comes of course as we know through faith in Jesus Christ where the curtain of separation between ourselves and the holy of holies is ripped asunder and we have access to God and to a right attitude and right mentality through Jesus Christ in our lives and we deal with the sin which is the real problem to us understanding the pleasure that he has given us and enables us to see pleasure in its right context so that the reality of understanding this world and which will have a pleasure of this world is first of all recognizing that in its original condition it was a good world to be part of a significantly good world perfect world to be part of and that sin has brought in that brokenness and ultimately the absolute and total pleasure of enjoying this world was when we were walking in pleasure with God so our real source and our real understanding and our real ultimate knowledge of pleasure is when we're walking with God in his creation when we have dealt with the sin that separates us from him and are walking with him Genesis chapter 3 verses 8 and 9 then the man and the wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden but the Lord called to man said where are you that's where we get pleasure wrong because we're hiding from God and God wants to walk with us and the life that we live the pleasure that we find will only be ultimate and meaningful when we're walking with God because our ultimate pleasure is in relationship with God whom have I in the heavens high but you Lord and nothing in the earth I desire besides you my soul thirsts for God the living

God my soul will be satisfied with the richest of foods blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness they will be filled you've made known to me the paths of life eternal pleasures at your right hand all of these verses and I'm already had more speak about those who have come to know and understand the ultimate pleasure is in relationship with God through Jesus Christ and that is the foundation and that is the focus where we will understand the life of pleasure that we seek for ourselves only in him otherwise it becomes a transient distraction and a replacing of worship with the one should be worshiped with idolatry and we're we're worshiping what shouldn't be worshiped so our perspective comes from recognizing goodness as it is brokenness when it's come in and healing from Jesus Christ is foundational to understanding pleasure and then in Christ and through Christ and in relationship with Christ Christ and finding pleasure in Christ we begin to see things differently we understand the reality and beauty of legitimate pleasure in our lives and one of his sermons Paul says in Acts 14 he has shown kindness and he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy is God who does this God who gives joy God who provides us with what is good and pleasurable are these great great words that Paul gives in 1st Timothy 6 17 don't put your hope in riches which are so uncertain but put your hope in God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment that great verse a great verse have you ever heard a sermon preaching that we should have maybe we'll preach maybe Tom should preach it next week because I'm away that's a great verse it's an amazing verse because it says so much about where our hope should lie where our riches should lie what are real genuine riches and what enjoyments about because he provides us with what is good and what we can enjoy in our lives that's the beauty of legitimate pleasure in God's world we know his boundaries and in Christ we can understand and we can see what it is that makes us satisfied in him God refreshes us with his good creation and our laughter and our joy and our pleasure and our watching and our playing we can enjoy and give God the glory for in all of these things because they are no longer why we live they're no longer why we

get up in the morning our careers or our ambitions or our abilities or our relationships or our pleasure that we seek when we can thank God for them and when we can put them in the rightful place recognizing that they are part of life's fulfillment and real life's refreshment then that is where we can enjoy pleasure if we're living for pleasure it enslaves us and if we can't let go of our pleasure and if we choose our pleasure without reference to God then we know that we are struggling to understand our own selves and who he is we make choices pray and think about the choices we make the beauty of legitimate pleasure but the Bible also makes clear the danger of illegitimate pleasure I think Ecclesiastes here does so but also in different places in Proverbs as well stolen water is sweet recognize what the Bible says stolen water is sweet it's sweet it's not tasteless it's not horrible stolen water is sweet food eaten in secret

is delicious but little do they know that the dead are there food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man but he ends up with a mouthful of gravel see how wise the Bible is how much wiser it is sometimes than us who kind of wag our fingers at sin and at temptation and think how terrible it is and how you couldn't possibly be tempted by temptation Bible doesn't say that Bible reminds us of the danger of illegitimate pleasure and it reminds us that ultimately jeopardizes our relationship with God it will often destroy the rights and legitimate pleasures of someone else and it will break our own hearts because it's selfish and it's deceitful and it cares little for God's reputation and for the heart of other people that pursuit of illicit pleasure the unrestrained pursuit of our appetites where our fulfillment is all that matters ends up being self-destructive and taking us further from God and so we need to recognize these things there's good and legitimate pleasure and there's also illegitimate and self-gratifying hurtful damaging pleasure and we can only recognize and know that when we are praying in relationship with God understanding the pleasure of being in relationship with him and so there's always for us the need and ecclesiastes comes round to this and the Proverbs does and the Bible does in all its thinking there is always the need for balance in the pursuit of these things we don't live for pleasure we aren't created for pleasure we're created for God but in being created for God and becoming right with

[28 : 23] God that is where we know pleasure and joy Proverbs 20 25 16 says if you find honey eat just enough too much of it and you'll vomit great that's exactly right isn't it we don't live for pleasure and we recognize that it is right in its rightful place too much and it distorts reality and it destroys our appetites and becomes obsessive and it becomes monotonous and the great thing about a holiday is that it's a holiday if you were in a holiday 365 days a year it would become boring and dull and monotonous the pleasure is in the break the pleasure is in doing something different the pleasure like in creating God's creative plan is six and one work and rest and all of God's creation is about balance and it's like a good meal as well isn't it?

I'm not sure it's a good meal but a special meal special meal you can't have a special meal every night because it would seem to be special it would be very ordinary and it wouldn't be something that would be pleasurable in the end like every pleasure it becomes damnable if it is not put in its right context and if it's not recognized in the balance that it should be so there's a need for that balance and pleasure and there's also the recognition of the reality of battle and pleasure is there to help sustain us in the battle just as the communion spiritually for us is that refreshing rest so that we rise into the Christian battle so all of the pleasure of life is given to us by God from God for us to enjoy to sustain us and to help us look forward to his unbridled pleasure in the new heavens and in the new earth so we remember as we close when we think about pleasure that actually joy is our greatest goal and that will include pleasure but joy is our greatest goal that's what Jesus did as he went to the cross he fixed we fix our eyes on Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross and that is a reality for us that we think about the glorious riches of this mystery of Christ in you which is the hope of glory that great joy that that brings us the lasting pleasure is in relationship with God that's where our joy is and that's where we find our joy is in this company and interestingly God's pleasure is related to our lives also the Lord delights in those who fear him who put their hope in his unfailing love so it's a reciprocal joy that as we come back to him reading a lot verses this week about God taking no pleasure in the death of the wicked and the joy that to see his people coming to him and the pleasure that he receives from that he delights in those who come back to him and I think that's a helpful balance for us in our lives and in our Christian thinking so significant the value that we have the freedom that we have to enjoy this life and its pleasures as we deal with the deceitfulness and the brokenness that often makes pleasures the gods that can't possibly satisfy us and can't possibly bring us meaning ultimate meaning and hope and eternal life so please

think about that and think particularly how wise and how insightful scripture continues to be and how understanding of human nature is and of our condition and of the reality of pleasure even without God and the reality of finding a word without God in life but that that's where it ends and that's where the ultimate realities cease to have influence on individual lives and leave people lost and deceived and far from God and in darkness. Let us thank God for Jesus Christ. Let's bow our heads and pray. Lord God I thank you today for Jesus Christ, pray for forgiveness for the number of times that I've dragged my feet into your company and the number of times often that we think that service of and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ is a narrow and hard way and a difficult way. It may be some of these things but it is a way of life and joy and pleasure and not the way of destruction. Remind us that our ultimate pleasure is in your company and the fullness and forgiveness and the joy is in loving you and in being loved and being redeemed. Remind us of the greatness of the forgiveness that we've received, the cost of setting us free. Forgive us when we shrug our shoulders at Calvary and think well big deal. Forgive us when we know that truth from the moment we could think and speak and it's become so commonplace too as that it neither moves us nor challenges us or activates our will. Forgive us for thinking we can live our lives as Christians on our own which becomes legalistic or licentious and forgive us for being imbalanced so often. Just enable us to plunge into our knowledge of you and into the wonders of your eternal character and being, the unsearchable riches of Christ, the marvellous and good nourishment that we receive, may we hunger and thirst after your righteousness and find it so beautiful and so pure and so good even in a world where we see so much that is tainted and broken and pleasure that is ugly and self-centred and short-lived and temporary. Lord, may we not be deceived into wallowing in such pleasure, may we not sell ourselves short, may we not live listening to the whispers of the evil one and his deceitfulness and may we think and know and consider the God who walks in the garden looking for his people and may we not be those who hide from you and seek somehow to justify our existence without reference to you. Forgive us for the things that sometimes cloud our thinking and choke up our living and the pleasures that we seek without reference to you and grant us wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the wonderful grace of the living God. Amen.