

Searching for Happiness (Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26)

Big Idea: We won't find happiness in learning, pleasure, or achievement, but earthly joys point us to the One who can satisfy us.

We all want the same thing: happiness. Every one of us. The question is: how do we get it?

That is the question we all face. We try to find and keep happiness. Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, writes:

Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. You fight for it, strive for it, insist upon it, and sometimes even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings. And once you have achieved a state of happiness, you must never become lax about maintaining it. You must make a mighty effort to keep swimming upward into that happiness forever, to stay afloat on top of it.

Every person in this room, and every person in this community, is looking for happiness, and we're trying all kinds of things to try to get it.

But there are only so many options. And that's where we find ourselves today in the book we're studying.

Last week we started looking at the ancient book of Ecclesiastes. This book is a wisdom book, meaning that it's meant to teach us how to live skillfully in this world. And last week it pointed out the very real fact that everything in this life is temporary, fleeting, and repetitive. How do we find happiness in a world like this?

You run some experiments to see what works. That's what one author (Gretchen Rubin) did, as she describes in her book *The Happiness Project*, doing things like singing in the morning, cleaning her closet, and reading Aristotle to see what would make her happy.

And that's exactly what the Preacher does in the passage we just read. He runs some experiments to see which ones lead to happiness.

Experiments

So let's see what experiments the Preacher tried to find happiness. You're going to see that not much has changed. These are the same experiments we try today.

Experiment One: Learning

The Preacher starts with learning. "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 1:13). The scope is breathtaking. He wants to conduct a comprehensive search. This is not a cursory search; it's a comprehensive one. He wants to look at everything, including folly according to verse 17. He's looking under every rock. No stone is unturned.

This is an admirable quest in many ways. It's what lies at the heart of our educational system, our universities and bodies of higher knowledge. There's great prestige in becoming an authority in your field. Our schools, libraries, and bookstores are all part of this quest, and it's a good one.

Learn from every guru. Read every book. Watch the documentaries. Try on different worldviews.

There is some value in this approach. In 2:13 he says, "Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness." It's not like wisdom and learning is all bad.

But this experiment fails for two reasons.

First: some things are just inscrutable. No matter how much wisdom we have, we won't be able to figure things out. That's what he means when he says in verse 15:

What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

In other words, there are unsolvable problems, and there are things we can't know. There will always be some aspects of life that remain a mystery no matter how hard we try to understand them.

There's a second reason this experiment fails. More knowledge can just produce more frustration. Look at verse 18: "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18). The picture he paints is that of irritation, or frustration verging on anger. Learning can't make you happy. Understanding life doesn't always make us happier. That's why they say that ignorance is bliss. Or, as somebody else (John Cheever) said, "The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education, and culture is disappointment."

So we don't find our meaning through learning. You won't find happiness at the bookstore, university, or through gurus, no matter how good they are.

Experiment Two: Pleasure

Experiment two is a little more fun. In 2:1 he says: "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.'" Verses 2 to 8 describe all the things he tried: comedy, alcohol, all the finer things in life. He had the best houses and gardens and all the accouterments. On top of that, he had women. He had more sexual partners than anyone could imagine. He denied himself nothing. He became a hedonist. He had it all.

The result is that he lived a better life than anyone else. Verse 9 says that he enjoyed more pleasure than anyone who had gone before him. He also had the means to do this. He had the wealth to afford this kind of lifestyle.

Again, you see this approach everywhere. Make enough money to live the life. Hit the bar. Party. Have sex. Buy nice stuff. Or a lighter version of this would be to distract yourself with distraction and diversion: social media, games, and entertainment.

But this experiment also failed. He says in verse 11:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Today's English Version says, "I realized that it didn't mean a thing. It was like chasing the wind."

Even after he enjoyed everything, he still felt empty. It's ironic. The harder we go after pleasure, the less pleasure we find. It's never enough. Nothing perishable will ever satisfy us, no matter what we get to enjoy.

Joy Davidman said: "Living for his own pleasure is the least pleasurable thing a man can do; if his neighbors don't kill him in disgust, he will die slowly of boredom and lovelessness."

Experiment Three: Achievement

The final experiment we're going to look at is achievement. Out of all of these, this is probably my drug of choice. Do things. Get things done. Leave your mark in the world. Karl Marx said, "Labor is the very touchstone of man's self-realization. Man labors to transform his world, to put his own mark upon it, to make it his." Work is where a lot of us get meaning in our lives. Plot the right career moves. Get in the right position. Get noticed. Get promoted. Build a name for yourself. Accomplish something.

That's what the Preacher did. He said in 2:4-6:

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

Again, we try this.

But this experiment failed too.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. (2:18-20)

No matter how hard you work, you still have to leave it behind. Someone else will sit in your chair one day, and they may be an idiot.

Everything in this life is temporary, fleeting, and repetitive. We want happiness, and we try learning, pleasure, and achievement to try to get them. But none of them ultimately give us the happiness we're looking for. I didn't even spend any time in the most sobering part of this passage in 2:12-16, which confronts us with our mortality.

If you take a good look at this world, it's clear that many of our approaches to happiness just don't work.

A Ray of Hope

It's at this point in Ecclesiastes that we get our first sign of hope.

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (2:24-25)

Maybe in the middle of all these experiments we've been missing what's right in front of us. Maybe the good things in life – food and drink and enjoyment of our work – aren't meant to ultimately satisfy us, but are actually gifts from God that point to something greater. They're not ultimate, but they're still good.

C.S. Lewis said:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them ... If they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

Another time he said, "Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy but to arouse it to suggest the real thing."

All the good things God gives us are meant for our enjoyment. They won't ultimately satisfy us, but they're all pointers to his goodness. He's saying we can taste God's goodness even in the middle of this difficult life.

God isn't upset that you like all the blessings he's given you. In fact, they're all gifts from him. The problem is when you expect them to give your life meaning and make you happy. They were never designed to do that. They're meant to point you to what will ultimately satisfy your soul, and that is him. In fact, he's done everything to make it possible for you to find your happiness in him, by sending his own Son to show us what he's like and to bring us into relationship with him. He wants your ultimate happiness, and he knows the only way you'll have it is if you find it in him through Jesus.

We won't find happiness in learning, pleasure, or achievement, but earthly joys point us to the One who can satisfy us.

So enjoy this life. Love your work. Enjoy your relationships. Have fun. Eat great food. But don't expect any of this to satisfy you. They are good gifts from the One who can ultimately satisfy you, and when you have God and these gifts you will have something.

Father, help us to enjoy your gifts as signposts to what will ultimately satisfy us, which is you. May we all find the happiness we're looking for in you through Jesus. I pray in his name. Amen.