

Ecclesiastes
"Experiments in Vanity" - 2:1-26

I. Introduction

- A. **Mansa Musa**, was the tenth *Mansa* ("sultan", "conqueror" or "emperor" of the **Mali Empire**, an Islamic West African state. He has been described as the wealthiest individual of the Middle Ages, at least, while some think he was the wealthiest person of all time.
- B. Did you know who he was before I told you his name and the fact he was exceedingly, ridiculously wealthy? Do we have a day to celebrate him? Did he gain any lasting (beyond the years he lived on the earth) value from his wealth? Of course not. It was all, as Solomon told us in chapter 1, vanity upon vanity - that is, *hebel* (meaningless, vapor, smoke) because God was not in it.

II. Experiments in Vanity - 2:1-26.

- A. As part of his search for "the good life," King Solomon examined everything. In the great laboratory of life his wisdom and power allowed him to have, he experimented with many things, always applying the wisdom that God had given him. In this chapter, Solomon records the process and the results of these experiments as he continues to lead his readers in a search for a lasting and satisfying meaning to life.
1. Solomon **Tests** Life - vv.1-11 - Solomon had the means and authority to do anything his heart desired. So it seems he first decides to test his own heart & see how he'd respond to two very common experiences in life: pleasure (vv. 1-3) and projects (vv. 4-11).
- a) Solomon's test of **Pleasure** -vv. 1-3.
- (1) The Hebrew people rightly believed that God made man to enjoy the blessings of His creation. The harvest season was a joyful time for them as they reaped the blessings of God on their labor.
- (a) Eight times in Ecclesiastes, Solomon uses the Hebrew word that means "pleasure," so it's obvious he did not consider God a celestial spoilsport who watched closely to make certain nobody was having a good time - at least what we think it is.
- (b) Solomon specifically mentions wine and laughter - two common sources of pleasure - he used in his experiment. In the end he declared they were "vaporous vanity" like a soap bubble that **bursts**, leaving nothing behind of lasting value.
- (2) The world in which we live today can be a bit **pleasure-mad** - when it leaves God **out** of the picture.
- (a) Many exchange lots of money to "buy experiences" that promise to let them temporarily escape life's burdens.
- (b) While there is absolutely nothing wrong with fun, the one who builds their life on pleasure alone is always disappointed.
- i) Why? For one thing, pleasure-seeking often becomes a selfish endeavor; and selfishness destroys true joy.
- ii) People who live for pleasure often exploit others to get what they want. They can lead to broken relationships & empty hearts. *People* are more important than *thrills*. The greatest joy = when we share God's pleasures with others.
- (c) One basic truth of our world = if living only for pleasure, enjoyment of it shrinks unless intensity of the pleasure increases. You can reach a point of diminishing returns where no enjoyment is left, only bondage to the so-called "pleasure."
- (3) A final reason why pleasure alone can never bring satisfaction = it appeals to only a part of us while ignoring the total person.
- (a) Entertainment becomes cheap & shallow, lacking true enrichment or enjoyment - because it takes place apart from God.
- (b) On the other hand, true pleasure not only brings delight, but it also builds character by enriching the total person.
- b) Solomon's test of **Projects** - vv. 4-11.
- (1) Next, Solomon gets involved in all kinds of projects, hoping to discover something to make life worth living.
- (a) He did great works (houses, cities, gardens, vineyards, orchards and forests) as well as the water systems they need to run.
- (b) Solomon not only had works, he also had workers. A **lot** of workers!
- i) He had two kinds of slaves: those he purchased and those born in his household. Wrong? Totally. Is abortion wrong?
- ii) Besides this, Solomon "drafted" 30,000 Jewish men to work on his various projects.
- (c) He also had wealth in flocks, herds, gold, and silver from his taxation program of the northern 10 tribes (1 Kings 4:7-8).
- (d) So he = wealthiest and wisest man in the entire world, **yet** was unhappy because activity never brings lasting pleasure.
- (2) Solomon found delight in all his labor (v. 10); but when he considered all his works, he saw only "vanity and vexation."
- (a) He is not condemning work. Work is a blessing from God (Gen. 2:15). In Proverbs, he exalts diligence/condemns laziness.
- (b) This helps us to understand why many top achievers are unhappy people, for some the "birth of disgust."
- (c) When some workaholics retire, they can feel so useless they sometimes die from lack of meaningful (to them) activity.
- c) So, Solomon, the Uber wise tested life - apart from God (under the sun) - and in his heart called it, "*Vanity! Vapor! Smoke! Futility!*"
2. Solomon **Hates** his test results - vv. 12-23.
- a) He now considers things from another viewpoint. He looks at his wisdom and wealth in light of the certainty of death.
- (1) What good is it to be wise and wealthy, he ruminates, if you are going to die and leave everything behind anyway?
- (2) The truth is only the person that is prepared to live can be prepared to die. Salvation in Christ gives our lives meaning!
- b) He first considers his **wisdom** - vv. 12-17.

- (1) Since **both** the wise man and the fool die, what is the value of wisdom? - apart from God both the wise and foolish are fools.
 - (2) "There is nothing new under the sun" so future generations - apart from God - repeat the same mistakes - again & again.
 - (3) However, in spite of the fact that all people must eventually die, wisdom in life is still of greater value than folly.
 - (a) *The wise man sees that death is coming and lives accordingly, while the fool walks in darkness and is caught unprepared.*
 - (b) In truth, it takes a very long time (most of our lives) to learn how to live wisely, & then it's over! It all seems so futile!
 - i) Solomon's fame has remained - because of his gift and his biblical connection. Who remembers the King of Sheba?
 - ii) Sadly most "famous" people who die are rarely mentioned in ordinary dialogue, even though their bios are all online.
 - (4) "I hate life!" he concludes. He's not contemplating suicide, because death was the **one** thing he wanted to avoid at all costs.
 - (a) *"I hate life and yet I am afraid to die!"* said Voltaire, a French humanist wrote in despair. Solomon would agree with him!
 - (b) Life w/o God (under the sun) seems irrational and futile to him - but it was better than death! But he was disgusted with it!
 - (5) As believers, we, in contrast, need to live by promises - not explanations - and know our *"labor is not in vain in the Lord."*
- c) He second considers his **wealth** - vv. 18-23.
- (1) Not only did Solomon hate life, but he hated the wealth that was the result of his toil. What? Is something wrong with the man?
 - (a) Solomon was born wealthy, and gained even more as king. Yet he gives us three reasons he's disgusted with wealth.
 - i) First, you can't keep it - v. 18.
 - (1) Sol. knew his death would come and everything would go to his descendants - like the rich fool in Luke 12.
 - (2) A Jewish proverb says, *"There are no pockets in burial shrouds."*
 - (3) Money is a medium of exchange - no more, no less. Unless it's spent wisely, it can't do anything for you.
 - (a) We are called today to be *stewards* of our wealth and recognize God as Provider and Owner of it.
 - (b) As stewards, we have the privilege of both enjoying it and using it for His glory.
 - ii) Second, you can't protect it - vv. 19-20.
 - (1) It's bad enough we have to leave our wealth behind; even worse we might leave it to somebody who'll waste it!
 - (2) Solomon didn't know it at the time, but his son Rehoboam would do that very thing (1 Kings 11:41-12:24).
 - (a) Many try to write their wills so their estates will not be wasted - from their POV.
 - (b) In spite of instructions they give, they have no way of knowing what the next generation will do with it!
Don't believe it? Ask the descendants of the Pharaohs whose graves were robbed of their incredible riches!
 - iii) Third, you can't enjoy it the way you should - vv. 21-23.
 - (1) If all we do is think about our wealth and worry about what will happen to it, we make our lives miserable.
 - (a) V. 21 tells us we do all the work and then leave it to somebody who didn't even work for it. Is that fair? No!!
 - (b) V. 22 asks the question, *"What does a man get for all his toil and anxious striving under the sun?"* Not much!
 - (2) Solomon = pessimistic, but he doesn't remain that way and in faith reaches the final stage of his "experiment."

3. Solomon finally **Accepts** the results of the tests - vv. 24-26.

- a) Solomon's conclusion is not, *"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!"* That is useless Epicurean fatalism **not** biblical faith.
 - (1) He instead is saying, *"Thank God for what you do have, use it, and enjoy it to the glory of God."*
 - (a) He makes it clear not only were the blessings from God, but the enjoyment of the blessings was God's gift as well (v. 24).
 - (b) Solomon considered it immoral if one who had the blessings of life from God would not - or could not - enjoy them.
 - (2) Jews read Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, a time of thanksgiving/rejoicing for God's abundant provision of their needs.
- b) The important thing is we seek to please the Lord (v. 26) and trust Him to meet every need. God will give us wisdom, knowledge, and joy - just like Solomon; these three gifts enable us to appreciate God's blessings and take pleasure in them.
- c) In the end, it's not enough to discover and possess many things; we must also discover and possess the kind of character - biblical based - that enables us to regard and use the things we encounter in our lives wisely and enjoy them properly.

III. Conclusions

- A. In the next eight chapters, Solomon considers more arguments about life's vanity and refutes them. At the end of each argument he says, *"Enjoy life and be thankful to God!"*
- B. Also, Solomon will honestly face various trials & injustices life this world throws at us, the things that can make us cry out, *"Why, Lord?"*
 1. We will find Solomon is neither a shallow optimist - wearing rose-tinted glasses, nor a skeptical pessimist - wearing blinders.
 2. He instead takes a balanced view of life and death and helps us look at both from God's eternal perspective. We desperately need that!
- C. *"Life isn't like a book,"* says Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship. *"Life isn't logical, sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. So our theology must be lived in the midst of that mess."* Solomon & the H.S. provide the theology. It's up to us to live it and be satisfied!