



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Life is Frustrating

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Ecclesiastes 2

Clint Pressley

*2 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 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. 12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. 13 Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. 15 Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. 16 For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been*

*long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! <sup>17</sup> So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, <sup>21</sup> because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

*<sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? <sup>26</sup> For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*(Pastor prays)*

The question has been asked this week: Will the center hold? And I think the answer has to be, "That depends entirely on what the center is made of, what's at the core." What is it that holds you together? Why haven't you gone off the deep end yet? How have you held it together? What is it that has grounded you?

Soren Kierkegaard was a troubled philosopher from another day and wrote in his journal, "Deep within every human being there still lies the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God and overlooked by the millions and millions in this enormous household." He wrote that as he pondered the aching emptiness in his heart. Kierkegaard is the man who gave us the idea of angst. It's the strange knowing in each of us that keeps us just outside of satisfaction's reach.

I think that's where we find the preacher in Ecclesiastes 2 as he gives us an inside view of his mind and heart as he attempts time after time to find some kind of joy and contentment in his life. In this chapter he takes on several personas to see if, in those pursuits, he can find just an

ounce of real peace. And as I studied I saw you there in some of these. I saw your pursuits and attempts and frustrations, and today I hope you will see yourself and your need for the contentment that Christ alone can give, that is already yours in Christ.

### **Without Christ the Frustration Never Ends**

#### **Without Christ fun leaves you empty-handed**

The preacher has already said that everything is vanity. Now in chapter 2, verse 1, he decides to put that theory to the test. Come now, I'm going to test you with pleasure. Go enjoy yourself. I think he's putting on the mask of a person whose whole goal in life is to have fun. And I mean who doesn't like to have fun? But more than that, I'm thinking of the person whose whole existence is to make sure it's enjoyable. And if something isn't enjoyable, then you really aren't interested in doing it.

In verse 2 the preacher speaks of laughter and pleasure. In verse 3 the preacher adds drinking alcohol to the mix. It's not a drunken frat party. This is the more responsible, respectable drinker. It helps to unwind and loosen up. It's from the comedy club to the bar with my friends. It's just blowing off steam and having fun and what happens is that becomes the goal. The goal means fun and enjoyment and laughter. I mean we even feel it in the church to make sure the experience on a Sunday morning is fun and enjoyable, which we certainly hope it is but it can't be the driving force for church and it can't be the driving force for your life. Be careful if you are someone who is bored if you aren't having fun. That's a shallow Christianity that's nice on a Sunday but evaporates in the winter of hard times. Even the preacher, after doing his experiment with fun says in verse 1 that this is vanity, *Havil*.

In verse 2 he says this is madness. What use is it? There's no bottom to it and we need something worthwhile to actually stand on! We need depth and texture; we need the Gospel. And we need not to trivialize it. We need to know the seriousness of sin and the grace of the cross. We need the victory of the resurrection and the joy in being reconciled to God and forgiven. We don't want to be empty-handed. Without Christ fun leaves us empty-handed. Then the preacher turns his attention to achievement.

#### **Without Christ Achievement Leaves Us Dissatisfied**

Let's look at verses 4 through 7 and see the list of projects. <sup>4</sup>*I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.* <sup>5</sup>*I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.* <sup>6</sup>*I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.* <sup>7</sup>*I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.*

So now he puts on the mask of the driven overachiever. I mean look at the number of things he was able to get done! He's the guy who gets things done. He's up early and exercises and accomplishes. In verse 4 he has great works and houses and vineyards. He has gardens, parks, fruit trees and reservoirs. This is the achiever, workaholic, builder that you've seen pictures of what he can do on Facebook and Instagram. If you want to get a job done he's the one to go to. This is not just hard work; this is smart work and it's impressive.

There are some downsides to this person. He's a little selfish although he seems giving. In verse four *myself* or *my* words start showing up. There is a false security. When you read the impressive list of great things done, it starts to sound a lot like the Garden of Eden this guy is building and if you go and read the history of Solomon's life, you see the real sense of building *my own paradise*. He's forgetting that in the words of John Milton, that *Paradise is Lost*. In the listing here in verses 4-6, you seem to have all the elements of the Garden of Eden except the one that actually matters, God. There is no mention of God.

There is one other really dark thing down in verse seven. <sup>7</sup>*I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house.* This view of people as pawns to be manipulated, to get what you want without actually having to do the work or at the least the willingness to value achievement over people. This is a “get the job done at all costs even if it means hurting someone” attitude. This whole section seems completely devoid of God and is a false paradise.

This is driven by a strong self and not prioritizing people. It's the actual antithesis to the Gospel. Earth is not our home, Christ must be the center and people are to be loved, served and brought to Christ. The whole point of the Gospel is to win people. God is glorified when sinning people become saved people at the cross of Jesus. Without Christ fun leaves us empty-handed. Without Christ achievement leaves us dissatisfied.

**Without Christ influence means nothing**

Here in verses 8,9 and 10, Solomon stops by the Playboy mansion to see what all the media hype is about. Here he rubs shoulders with the rich and famous, and in verse 8 he had his own band and many concubines. Verses 8-9 introduce us to the culture of money and sex and power. To the influencers, the ones you follow on Instagram. They are the ones whose songs you know on Spotify and you know who they are hooking up with. And the preacher says, "I joined the crowd for a while."

Here seems to be the modern aspirations for what success looks like. Most of us don't live like this but we do voyeurize it. We watch this set and maybe even wish we had that kind of lifestyle. The preacher takes it one step further in verse 10. There's the pinnacle, straight hedonism. <sup>10</sup>*And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.*

Here is a young world that has been disciplined by culture and not the church and has lost its sense of bearing, its sense of the truth. And at the end of verse 10 the preacher says, all this pleasure, that was my reward. Now watch what happens in the text in verse 11. The preacher looks at all the ground he's covered so far, fun and achievement and hedonism, and he does some sobering assessment. <sup>11</sup>*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.* There are several things here. There is vanity, striving after the wind with no gain and nothing under the sun. Living like this is all there really is. You see again how Ecclesiastes is not anti-Gospel, It actually shows us the need for the Gospel! Maybe you haven't seen yourself yet in any of these three sections. Let's move on to you thinkers in verse 12.

### **Without Christ deep thinking is depressing**

Let's start in verse 12. <sup>12</sup>*So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.* Here's the thinking person, the introspective, quiet person. You have to think before you make up your mind. "Still waters run deep." That's you. The reader takes that on and comes to the conclusion that it is better to be like this. He even says in Proverbs 17:28, *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.* And verse 14 says, <sup>14</sup>*The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event*

*happens to all of them.* And yet, something really bothers him. Look at him thinking clearly about the absolute injustices.

Let's just read verses 15-17. <sup>15</sup> *Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.* <sup>16</sup> *For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!* <sup>17</sup> *So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

In verse 17 the preacher says, "the more I think about it the more depressed I get and I hate my life!" The biggest problem that stalks the preacher here is death. What does it pay to be wise if I do just like the fool does?! He comes to the conclusion that death is utterly impartial and indiscriminate. This is when you get into your own head and think, "what's the use?" This is Jeremiah under the juniper tree. Verse 18 says "I hate it," verse 19 questions my stuff. Verse 20 has despair. 21 has great evil and injustice and it's all summed up in verse 23. *For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

All of that. Every bit of the fun, achievement, success, hard work, money, sex, power, influence, and wisdom is without God. Then Solomon finally gets to the bottom and there's God! In verses 24, 25, and 26, God is finally in the mix. Yes, life has all kinds of issues and pains and frustrations and anxieties. But finally the perspective in verse 24 is that everything is a gift from God.

Verse 25 says you would never smile if it weren't for Him. Verse 26 says that the wisdom, knowledge, joy and justice all come through Him. And this is most fully displayed at the cross. The preacher says, "why are you pursuing all that junk in the world? Why can't you see that regardless of what you go through, when your perspective is centered on Christ, you see reason to thank God?"

Christian, there is so much for you be thankful for, to be grateful to God for, to look around at then never complain, and to rest in the grace that God is giving you in Jesus. And if you are not in Christ, you can work hard, you can have all the fun in the world, you can pursue everything

you need to. You can be the best, smartest, most thinking person, but without Christ it's still vanity.

Our God is in the heavens. He does what He pleases. He created you and me in His image, but that image has been disfigured by our own sin and separates us from God. Ecclesiastes teaches that. But the Gospel says that God has loved us in Jesus and He sent Jesus to pay for our sin on the cross. He sent Jesus who lived perfectly so that any person who looks to Jesus on the cross has his sins forgiven and the righteousness of Christ applied to him. I'm asking you to believe that because without Christ the frustration never ends, but with Christ, the frustration never wins. Will you come to Jesus this morning and be saved? Will you change your perspective and be thankful for the grace that God has given us in Jesus?

*(Pastor prays)*