

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

by Ray C. Stedman

Whether we know it or not, all of us are engaged in a quest for something which will meet the needs of our heart. We all are looking for the secret to finding delight anytime, anywhere, and under any circumstances. What we are looking for, in other words, is the secret to contentment. That is the greatest blessing in life.

That too is what King Solomon was looking for, and in the book of Ecclesiastes he describes his search. In Chapter 1 of the book we were introduced to Solomon and learned of his qualifications for this search. He was very rich, he was an astute observer of human life, and he had plenty of time and money. He also was fully aware of the difficulties involved, stemming from the fallen nature of man and the intricacies and complexities of life. We learned from him that there is nothing in and of itself that can make us content. No thing, no possession, no relationship will endure to continually yield up to us the fruit of contentment and delight.

In Chapter 2 we are introduced to the record of what Solomon found in this search, the proof of that claim that I have just stated. Here we have an examination of the various ways by which men have sought through the ages to find contentment, enjoyment and delight in life. The first way, the one that is most popular today and always has been, is his examination of what philosophers call hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure. All of us instinctively feel that if we can just have fun we will find happiness. That is what the Searcher takes up first to see whether or not that is true.

He starts with what we can well call the experience of fun and games. Verses 1-3:

I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine -- my mind still guiding me with wisdom -- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life. {Ecc1 2:1-3 RSV}

-- how best to spend your life. Have you ever asked yourself, What can I do that will make me happy all of my life? That was Solomon's question.

There is a lot implied in this paragraph. What a blast they must have had! Solomon, with all his riches, gave himself completely over to the pursuit of pleasure. He must have spent weeks and months, even years, in this search.

Here he gives us details of what he experienced. The first thing he says is that he said to himself, "Enjoy yourself," so he went in for mirth, laughter and pleasure. You can let your mind fill in the gaps here. Imagine how the palace must have rocked with laughter. Every night they had stand-up comics, and lavish feasts, with wine flowing like water. Harrah's Club was never like this! In fact, you may be interested to know what just one day's menu consisted of during this time. First Kings records what King Solomon required for one day to feed his retinue in the royal palace:

Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour [a cor is about ten bushels], and sixty cors of meal [grain of various sorts], ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle [prime Grade A meat], a hundred sheep, besides harts, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl [chickens, ducks, and all kinds of birds]. (1 Kings 4:22-23)

That was the menu for just one day. It has been estimated that that would feed between ten and twenty thousand people, so there were a lot of others involved in this search for pleasure along with the king.

Solomon gives us the result of the search. Laughter, he said to himself, is madness. I wonder if each of us has not experienced this to some degree. Have you ever spent an afternoon with a group of your friends giving yourself to laughing, having fun, and telling stories about all kinds of experiences? If you think carefully about it you will find that most of the stories were based on exaggeration; they were all embellished a little; they did not have much basis in reality. It is the same with laughter. Laughter only deals with the peripheries of life. There is no solid content to it. "The laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under the pot," (Ecclesiastes 7:6). Laughter is only a crackling noise, that is all. It leaves one with a sense of unfulfillment. I have had afternoons and evenings like that that were delightful occasions. We laughed all the time as we rehashed experiences, told jokes, etc., but when all was said and done we went to bed feeling rather empty and unfulfilled. That was Solomon's experience. He is not saying that this is wrong. The Bible does not say that either. It says that laughter is empty; it does not fulfill or satisfy.

Of pleasure, Solomon's comment is, "What use is it?" What does it contribute to life? Nothing, is his answer. Pleasure consumes resources, it does not build them up. Most of us cannot afford a night out more than once or twice a year because it costs so much. Going out uses up resources that hard work have put together. Pleasure, Solomon concludes, adds nothing.

Wine, he says, is of no help either. It appears to be. Every social gathering today almost invariably includes the dispensing of liquor first. The first thing the stewardess says after your plane is airborne is, "Would you like a cocktail?" There is a widespread conviction in the world that you cannot get strangers to talk to each other until you loosen them up with liquor. And it seems to work. After wine or cocktails are served, people soon begin to chat a little bit and the tenseness and quietness is lessened. But not much of any significance is ever said, either on planes or in social gatherings. There is little communication; it is all surface conversation. Wine, Solomon says, does not really help. "I looked into it," he says, "and I found that it too was vanity; it left people with a feeling of futility and emptiness."

So he moves to another form of pleasure. Verse 4:

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. {Eccl 2:4-6 RSV}

Here is another form of pleasure -- projects, parks, and pools. Many people today attempt to find satisfaction in this way. There is pleasure in designing and building a house. Some people give their whole lives to this. This area is noted for the Winchester Mystery House, built by a woman who could not stop building. The house is a conglomeration of rooms, doors that open on to blank walls, staircases that go nowhere, etc., anything just to keep on building. Some wealthy people gain a reputation as philanthropists because they endow beautiful public buildings, but they always manage to get their names engraved on a brass plaque somewhere in the building. All they are really doing is indulging an edifice complex! It was said of the emperor Nero that he found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble. But history tells us that he did not do that for the beautification of Rome, he did it for his own gratification and his own fame.

Solomon too gave himself to this. His own house took fourteen years to build, the temple seven. He built houses for his many wives whom he brought to Jerusalem, spending time, money and interest doing so. Southwest of Jerusalem, in a place seldom visited by tourists; there exist yet today vast depressions in the earth which are still called the Pools of Solomon, which he used to water the forest of trees which he planted in an effort to find satisfaction for his own heart.

Solomon next goes on to a summary of things which today we could only call "the good life." Verses 7-8:

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. 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, man's delight. {Eccl 2:7-8 RSV}

Does that sound modern? He had servants to wait on his every whim. The rich always want somebody to do all the hard work for them. In this case they were slaves who could not even go on strike if they did not like what was happening. Solomon had ranches to provide diversion and profit in the raising herds and flocks. Many wealthy people invest their money in cattle and horse ranches. Bank accounts too give a sense of security. Solomon says he gathered " silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces," and brought it all to Jerusalem. He had all the money he needed.

Then he had musicians brought in, men and women singers and bands. There probably were bands called, "The Wandering Pebbles," and "The Appreciative Corpses!" Certainly the top band of all, "The Bedbugs," played in the courts and palaces of the king! He had all kinds of bands, even the Jerusalem Pop Orchestra played for concerts under the stars. This is very up-to-date, isn't it? We think we have invented all of this, but here it is in the ancient book of Solomon.

Finally, they had Playmates, girls with bunny tails running around the palace. Concubines, Solomon calls them, "man's delight." All the joys of untrammelled sexuality were available at all times. This certainly shows how wrong is the idea of some people who say that the Playboy mentality is peculiar to the twentieth century alone. King Solomon tried all of this.

What did he find? Here are his honest conclusions, Verses 9-11:

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. 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. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was emptiness and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. {Eccl 2:9-11 RSV}

That is a very honest reporting. Solomon says there were some positive things, apparently. First, he gained a degree of notoriety, he says. He became great, surpassing all who went before him in Jerusalem. Many people think that fame will satisfy the emptiness of the heart. Solomon found fame. He adds that he kept his objectivity, though. "My wisdom remained with me," he says. In other words, "I was able to assess this as I went along. I did not lose myself in this wild search for pleasure. I was able to look at myself and evaluate it as I went along. But I tried everything. I did not miss or set aside anything." He belonged to the jet-set of that day. "I enjoyed it for a while," he says. "I found pleasure in all my toil, but that was all the reward I got for my labor -- momentary enjoyment. Each time I repeated it I got a little less enjoyment out of it." "My conclusion," Solomon says, "is that it was not worth it. Like a candle, it all burned away, leaving me jaded and surfeited. Nothing could excite me after that." He concludes that it was all emptiness, a striving after wind. He was burned out.

Verses 12-23 form a rather lengthy passage in which the Searcher compares two possible ways of pursuing pleasure. Somebody might well come along at this point and say to Solomon, "The reason you ended up so burned out is that you went at this the wrong way. You planned your pleasures, you deliberately gave yourself to careful scheduling of what you wanted to try next. But that is not the way to do this. The way to enjoy pleasure, to really live it up, is to abandon yourself. Go in for wild, impulsive, devil-may-care pleasure. Do what you feel like doing." Surely this was when the modern motto, "If it feels good, do it," was first advanced.

"All right," Solomon says, "I examined that." Verse 12:

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done. {Ecl 2:12 RSV}

By that he means that no one can challenge or contest his judgment in this area because no one could exceed his resources; people who follow him can only repeat what he himself has done.

But after trying it all, here are his conclusions. Verse 13:

Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. {Ecl 2:13 RSV}

It is much better to go at it with your eyes open, he says. If you are going to pursue pleasure, at least do not throw yourself into it like a wild man. If you do so you will burn yourself out; you will get involved in things that you cannot imagine. It is like the difference between light and darkness. If there is any advantage to walking in light versus stumbling about in the darkness that is the difference between a wise and careful planning of pleasure and a foolish abandonment to it.

The reason why it is like that is this, Verse 14:

The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; {Ecl 2:14a RSV}

In other words, the wise man can foresee some of the results of what he is doing and perhaps avoid some of them so that the full impact of living for pleasure does not hit him as fast and as completely as it does the fool. Many have discovered this to be true. The newspapers every day tell of young people who gave themselves to the wild pursuit of pleasure who are now in jail, or burned out with drugs after a relatively short time. Solomon says it is better to pursue pleasure according to the way of the wise.

But either way, he says, neither one can avoid death. Here is a very insightful statement at the close of Verse 14:

... and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them. Then I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For the wise man 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 man dies just like the fool! {Ecl 2:14b-16 RSV}

It does not really make a lot of difference; in the end they both come to the same fate.

I have often quoted for you the eloquent words of Lord Bertrand Russell. He was widely regarded as a very wise man, although a thorough-going atheist and a defender of humanism. This was his view of life:

One by one as they march, our comrades vanish from our sight seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little days.

Those words express the very truth that the Searcher brings out here. Finally, Solomon says, no matter how carefully you pursue

life and pleasure it will end in the darkness and dust of death; the fool and the wise man are both forgotten. How many of you knew wise men and women in your past whom no one remembers now? These words are terribly true.

Then he comes to his final, remarkable reaction. Verse 17:

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man 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. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. {Ecc1 2:17-21 RSV}

Notice the increasing depression there. First, there is a sense of being grieved, of being hurt by life. "I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me," the Searcher says. His experience is one of increasing dislike because there is a diminishing return of pleasure for all the effort he makes to enjoy life. Have you ever seen people determined to have fun even if it kills them? They try their best to extract from the moment all the joy they can, but they get very little for their efforts. This, Solomon says, was a grief to him.

Then, second, he was frustrated. "Why do I have to work to put all this together, using all my wisdom and efforts, and eventually have to leave it to some fool coming behind me who will waste it in a few months?" he asks. He feels frustrated by the unfairness of this.

Finally, he sinks into despair. "I turned about and gave my heart up to despair," he says, because he is helpless to change this law of diminishing returns. I think this is the explanation for the phenomenon of the sudden, unexpected suicides of popular idols, of men and women who apparently had seized the keys to life, who had riches and fame, and whom the media constantly held up as objects worthy of imitation. Every now and then, however, finding nothing but frustration and despair as he has used up life too quickly and there is no joy left in it, one of these beautiful people takes a gun and blows his brains out. Think of people like Jack London, and Ernest Hemingway. Just last week Hemingway's brother committed suicide, as their father had done some years earlier. We think of Freddy Prinze; of Elvis Presley, who virtually killed himself with drugs. Yes, these words which Solomon has faithfully recorded for us are true; they correspond to life. Emptiness and vexation were Solomon's own experience when he tried to live it up without the missing element that it took to meet the hunger of his heart.

So he concludes with this eternal question, Verse 22:

What has a man from all the toll and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? [Notice, "beneath the sun," in the visible world.] For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. [Insomnia at night, restlessness in his heart, is what he got under the sun.] This also is emptiness. {Ecc1 2:22-23 RSV}

Is there no answer? Is it all hopeless?

In the three verses which follow we have the first statement of the true message of this book. Is it just a matter of time before we too are all jaded, burned out and surfeited, life having lost all value, meaning and color for us? No, says the Searcher. Put a relationship with God into that picture and everything changes. The text says (Verse 24):

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. {Ecc1 2:24a RSV}

Unfortunately here is another instance where we have lost the true meaning of the verse by a bad translation. In the next chapter there is a similar passage that properly includes the words, "there is nothing better than," but that is not what it says here. Delete from the text the words, "better than," because they are not in the Hebrew and they do not belong here. What this text actually says is,

There is nothing *in* man that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

There is nothing in man, there is no inherent value in him that makes it possible for him to extract true enjoyment from the things he does. That is the first thing Solomon says.

What does, then? He tells us:

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have

enjoyment? {Eccl 2:24b-25 RSV}

That is his second declaration, and that is the true message of this book. Enjoyment is a gift of God. There is nothing in possessions, in material goods, in money, there is nothing in man himself that can enable him to keep enjoying the things he does. But it is possible to have enjoyment all your life if you take it from the hand of God. It is given to those who please God. Verse 26:

For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; {Eccl 2:26a RSV}

Wisdom and knowledge have been mentioned before as things you can get from "under the sun," but they will not continue. To have added to it the ingredient of pleasure, of continual delight going on and on, unceasing throughout the whole of life, you must take it from the hand of God. The man who pleases God is given the gift of joy.

It is wonderful to realize that this book -- and the whole Bible -- teaches us that God wants us to have joy. He gave us life that we might have joy. In his letter to Timothy, Paul said, "He gives us richly all things to enjoy." It is God's desire and intent that all the good things of life that are mentioned here should contribute to the enjoyment of man; but only, says this Searcher, if you understand that that enjoyment does not come from things or from people. It is an added gift of God, and only those who please God can find it.

How do you please God? In many places in Scripture we are told, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." It is faith that pleases him, belief that he is there and that everything in life comes from his hand. Underscore in your minds the word all. Pain, sorrow, bereavement, disappointment, as well as gladness, happiness and joy, all these things are a gift of God. When we see life in those terms then any and every element of life can have its measure of joy -- even sorrow, pain, and grief. These things were given to us to enjoy. That is the message of this book. The writer will develop this further in the passages that follow.

This is also the message of Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose." It is also the message of Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths."

The fourth thing which Solomon says here is that all others labor for the benefit of those who please God. Verse 26b:

... but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. {Eccl 2:26b RSV}

That explains a remarkable thing that I have observed many times. Privileged as I often am to speak in various conference centers around the country, I have often noted the fact that many of these Christian gatherings are held in the expensive homes of millionaires who were not Christians:

I am thinking, for instance, of Glen Eyrie, the headquarters of the Navigators, outside Colorado Springs. There in a beautiful natural glade, General William Palmer, founder of Colorado Springs and founder of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, built an English-style stone castle for his British bride. She never lived in it more than a few weeks, and he himself never enjoyed that property at all. It sat empty for years. Finally it was sold several times and ended up in the hands of the Navigators, who are using it as a Christian conference ground and world headquarters for their training movement.

Twice I have been invited to be conference speaker at a beautiful site on a bluff overlooking the Columbia River in Oregon, an estate called Menucha. This wonderful home, covering almost an acre of ground, was built by a wealthy Jewish businessman who had little interest in spiritual things. He entertained Presidents at that home, but now it is in the hands of the Alliance Churches of Oregon.

You can duplicate this kind of story many, many times. Isn't it remarkable that God so planned life that these multimillionaires in their pursuit of pleasure spent lavishly on their homes in order that their estates might at last be given into the hands of those who please God? These lavish spenders will not get anything for all their efforts. There is a deep irony about this.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. {Eccl 2:26c RSV}

Isn't it strange that the more you run after life, panting after every pleasure, the less you find, but the more you take life as a gift from God's hand, responding in thankful gratitude for the delight of the moment, the more that seems to come to you? Even the trials, the heartaches and handicaps that others seek to avoid are touched with the blessing of heaven and seem to minister to the heart of the one who has learned to take them from the hand of God.

Fanny Crosby is one of the favorite hymn writers of all time. Blind almost from birth, she lived to be 95 years old. When she was only eight years old she wrote this couplet:

Oh, what a happy child I am
Although I cannot see.
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't.
To weep and sigh
Because I'm blind,
I cannot and I won't.

That is the philosophy that pleases God, and that is what the Searcher is talking about here.

All the objections that can be raised against this are going to be examined and tested in the pages that follow. When we finish the book we will find that the Searcher has established without a doubt that joy is a gift of God, and it comes to those who take life daily, whatever it may bring, from the hand of a loving Father.

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