

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Pleasure, Toil, and Wisdom All Tested

Ecclesiastes 2:1–26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help students see that Solomon's grand experiment proves pleasure, achievement, and even wisdom pursued under the sun cannot satisfy the soul or escape death, so that they stop expecting from God's gifts what only God Himself can give.

Lead the class to receive the chapter's quiet gospel, that enjoyment of ordinary work and daily bread is a gift from God's hand to those who fear and please Him, while guarding against both a love of money and a contempt for honest labor.

Point the class forward to Christ, in whom treasure is kept in heaven beyond the reach of the grave and in whom true wisdom is found, so that the despair of Ecclesiastes 2 becomes living hope and grateful, faithful work.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 Solomon withholds nothing from himself, pursuing pleasure, wine, building projects, wealth, and every desire of his eyes. What does the text reveal about the limits of pleasure and achievement pursued apart from God, and why does even great success leave him saying it was all vanity and a chasing after wind?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Solomon opens the chapter as a scientist of the soul, designing the most lavish experiment in human history. He says in his heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure (2:1), and then he denies himself nothing. He explores laughter, wine, great building projects, vineyards, gardens, parks, pools, herds, silver, gold, singers, and every desire his eyes asked for (2:1–10). The point is not that he stumbled into excess but that he deliberately reached for everything we secretly believe would satisfy us. No human being is better positioned to run this test, and that is precisely why his conclusion carries such weight.

Notice that Solomon kept his wisdom through the whole pursuit (2:3, 2:9). This was not a drunken fool throwing his life away. It was a clear-eyed king studying his own heart as he indulged it. He found real, momentary reward in the labor (2:10), and we should not flatten that. The gardens were beautiful. The work was satisfying in the moment. But when he stood back and surveyed all his hands had done and all the toil he had spent, the verdict was vanity and a chasing after wind, with nothing gained under the sun (2:11).

The phrase under the sun is the key. Solomon is measuring life on a closed horizon, as if this world were all there is. On that horizon, even total success leaves the soul empty, because the soul was made for more than the sun shines upon. The pleasures were not evil in themselves; the error was expecting them to do what only God can do. This is the gentle trap our own age sets for us, promising satisfaction in the next acquisition while the horizon keeps receding.

For the class, the aim is not to shame anyone for enjoying good things or working hard. It is to expose the lie that any created thing can bear the weight of our deepest longing. Solomon paid full price for this lesson so we would not have to. The good gifts point beyond themselves to the Giver, and only when we stop asking the gift to be God can we finally enjoy it rightly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pleasure and achievement are good gifts but cannot satisfy the soul made for God
- Under the sun describes a closed horizon that leaves even success empty
- Solomon kept his wisdom, so this is sober testimony, not a cautionary tale of recklessness
- The error is not enjoying gifts but expecting gifts to do God's work
- Modern culture repeats Solomon's lie with the next purchase or promotion
- Honest work has real momentary reward that the text does not deny

Discussion Prompts

- What did Solomon include in his experiment, and what did he conclude in 2:11?
- Why does pursuing pleasure under the sun leave the soul empty?
- Where do you see our culture making Solomon's same promise today?

Question 2

Student Question:

Solomon said he gave his heart to seek out happiness yet kept his wisdom with him through the whole experiment. As you examine your own pursuit of happiness, where have you been gathering and building while quietly hoping the next accomplishment will finally satisfy your soul?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the mirror toward the student. Solomon gave his heart to seek out happiness while keeping his wisdom, and most of us are doing a quieter version of the same thing. We are gathering and building, telling ourselves that the next milestone will be the one that finally settles our restless hearts. The text invites honest self-examination, not condemnation.

Help the class name the specific shape this takes in real life. For one person it is the renovation that will make the house finally feel finished. For another it is the savings target, the title at

work, the body in shape, the perfect family photo. None of these is sinful in itself. The danger is the silent expectation hidden underneath, the belief that contentment is being held hostage by something we have not yet obtained.

Solomon's gift to us is that he ran the test to completion. He did not stop at the renovation; he built houses, plural, and planted vineyards and made pools (2:4–6). He reached the finish line of every pursuit we can only imagine, and the finish line was empty. When we admit that our own striving carries the same hope, we can let Solomon's report do its merciful work.

Encourage students to sit with the longing rather than instantly explaining it away. The point of naming it is not to feel guilty but to relocate the hope. The same heart that keeps reaching for the next thing was made to rest in God, and recognizing the misdirected longing is the first step toward resting.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We quietly believe the next accomplishment will satisfy us
- Naming the specific pursuit is the start of honesty before God
- The pursuits themselves are often good; the hidden expectation is the danger
- Solomon ran the test to completion so we can trust his report
- Misdirected longing should be relocated to God, not merely suppressed
- Self-examination here is meant to free, not to shame

Discussion Prompts

- What is one thing you are quietly hoping will finally satisfy you?
- How does keeping wisdom while still chasing happiness describe your own life?
- What would change if you relocated that hope from the gift to the Giver?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 12–16 Solomon judges that wisdom surpasses folly as light surpasses darkness, yet he sees that one fate, death, comes to both the wise and the fool, and both are forgotten. What is this passage teaching about the real value of wisdom and the limit it runs up against under the sun?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verses 12–16 Solomon turns to compare wisdom and folly, and he is refreshingly fair. Wisdom truly does excel folly as light excels darkness (2:13). The wise man has eyes in his head while the fool walks in darkness (2:14). This is not the cynicism of a man who has given up on wisdom. He genuinely affirms its superiority for living well in this world.

But then he runs wisdom up against the one wall it cannot scale. The same event, death, happens to both the wise and the fool (2:14–15). Worse, neither is finally remembered; in the days to come both will have been forgotten (2:16). On the closed horizon of under the sun, wisdom buys a better life but cannot buy a different ending. The grave takes the wise and the fool alike, and time erases the memory of both.

This is a crucial balance for the class. Ecclesiastes is not anti-wisdom; the whole book is wisdom literature urging us to fear God. Solomon is simply being honest that earthly wisdom, however valuable, is not ultimate. It cannot defeat death or guarantee remembrance. That honesty is what makes us look for a wisdom that can, and the New Testament names it: Christ, who is made unto us wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30) and who has broken the very grave Solomon could not.

Guide students to hold both truths. Pursue wisdom; it is light, and walking in light is better than stumbling in darkness. But do not ask earthly wisdom to be your savior. Only the wisdom of God in Christ reaches past the grave that ends every earthly story.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wisdom genuinely excels folly as light excels darkness (2:13)
- Yet one fate, death, comes to the wise and the fool alike (2:14)
- Both the wise and the fool are forgotten in time to come (2:16)
- Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature; it is not against wisdom
- Earthly wisdom is valuable but not ultimate, for it cannot defeat death
- True wisdom that conquers the grave is found in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30)

Discussion Prompts

- How does Solomon describe the difference between wisdom and folly in 2:13–14?
- What wall does wisdom run into in verses 14–16?
- Why does this push us to look for a wisdom beyond the grave?

Question 4

Student Question:

Solomon was troubled that the wise man and the fool both die and are forgotten in time to come. How does honestly facing your own mortality change the way you weigh what you are giving your days and energy to right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of mortality into the student's own calendar. Solomon was troubled that he, the wisest man alive, would die like any fool and be forgotten in time (2:15–

16). Most of us live with death safely tucked out of sight, but the chapter asks us to look at it honestly, the way Scripture often does, so that we number our days and gain a heart of wisdom.

Facing mortality is not morbid; it is clarifying. When we remember that our time is finite and that no earthly achievement outruns the grave, many of the things we worry over shrink to their true size, and a few things we neglect suddenly grow large. The reflection asks each student to weigh what their days and energy are currently being spent on against the certainty that those days will end.

Be careful to lead this toward hope, not despair. Solomon, writing before the resurrection of Christ, sees only the grave on his horizon. We read with the empty tomb behind us. Death is real, but for the one who belongs to the Lord it is not the final word. Facing mortality honestly should drive us not to panic but to invest our brief lives in what God has promised will last.

Invite students to name one concrete adjustment. If our days are numbered and our work will pass to others, what relationship, what act of service, what walk with God deserves more of us than it is getting? Mortality faced in faith becomes a teacher, not a tyrant.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Even the wisest die and are forgotten in time (2:15–16)
- Facing mortality honestly clarifies what truly matters
- Many worries shrink and a few priorities grow when death is in view
- Solomon wrote before the resurrection; we read with the empty tomb behind us
- For the believer, death is real but not the final word
- Numbering our days should produce wise investment, not panic

Discussion Prompts

- How does honestly facing your own death change what feels important?
- What currently consumes your energy that the grave will render small?
- How does Christ's resurrection turn this sober truth into hope?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 17–23 Solomon despairs over his labor because he must leave everything to a man who comes after him, and he cannot know whether that heir will be wise or foolish. What does this reveal about the human longing for our work to mean something lasting, and why does toil apart from God lead to such grief and restless nights?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In verses 17–23 Solomon's despair reaches its lowest point, and the trigger is the heir. He must leave all his labor to the man who comes after him, and he has no control over whether that

man will be wise or a fool (2:18–19). Everything he toiled and grew wise to build will be handed to someone who never sweated for it and may squander it. So his heart turns to despair over all his labor (2:20).

This exposes a deep human longing: we want our work to mean something that lasts beyond us. We pour ourselves into projects and hope they will endure, that our names and our labor will not be erased. Solomon faces the painful truth that under the sun he cannot guarantee any of it. The result is sleepless nights, for even at night his heart does not rest (2:23). Toil without God becomes a sorrow and a vexation.

Notice the contrast the text is setting up. Labor pursued as a way to secure permanence and meaning by ourselves becomes a grief. The very next verses will reveal the alternative: work received as a gift from God's hand, with outcomes entrusted to Him. The despair of 2:17–23 is the dark backdrop against which the quiet light of 2:24–26 will shine.

For the class, the point is to feel the weight of trying to control what we cannot. We cannot control who inherits, who remembers, or what becomes of our best efforts once they leave our hands. That burden was never ours to carry. The restless nights of verse 23 are the predictable fruit of clutching outcomes that belong to God alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Solomon despairs that he must leave his labor to an heir he cannot control (2:18–19)
- Humans long for their work to outlast them and mean something
- Under the sun there is no guarantee any of it endures
- Toil apart from God becomes sorrow, vexation, and sleepless nights (2:23)
- The despair is the dark backdrop for the gift revealed in 2:24–26
- Trying to control uncontrollable outcomes is a burden never meant to be ours

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the thought of his heir drive Solomon to despair?
- What does verse 23 reveal about toil that has no rest in God?
- How does this set up the contrast with verses 24–26?

Question 6

Student Question:

Solomon could not control what would become of all he had built once it passed to another. Where in your own life are you anxious about outcomes you cannot finally control, and what would it look like to entrust those things to God instead of carrying them as your own burden?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This reflection takes Solomon's anxiety about the heir and makes it personal. We all have outcomes we cannot control: how our children will turn out, what becomes of the work we have built, how we will be remembered, whether our efforts will be received or wasted. Like Solomon, we can let these unknowns rob us of sleep, or we can learn to entrust them to God.

Help students locate their own version of the uncontrollable heir. Perhaps it is a grown child making choices you cannot make for them. Perhaps it is a business, a ministry, or a reputation whose future is genuinely out of your hands. The anxiety is real, and the chapter takes it seriously rather than dismissing it. But it also points beyond it.

The remedy is not indifference but entrustment. Scripture repeatedly calls us to do our work faithfully and then to place the results in God's hands, casting our care upon Him because He cares for us. Solomon's mistake was to carry the whole weight of the outcome himself, as if the meaning of his life depended on controlling what came next. We are invited instead to labor with open hands.

Encourage students to name the specific worry and to practice the act of releasing it to God in prayer. The difference between a sleepless night and a restful one is often the difference between clutching an outcome and entrusting it. God is the only one who can hold what we cannot, and He is entirely trustworthy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We all face outcomes we cannot finally control
- Like Solomon, uncontrolled futures can rob us of peace
- The remedy is entrustment to God, not indifference
- Faithful work plus released results is the pattern Scripture commends
- Solomon carried weight that was never his to carry
- Releasing outcomes in prayer is the path from restlessness to rest

Discussion Prompts

- What outcome are you currently anxious to control but cannot?
- What would it look like to entrust that to God this week?
- How does laboring with open hands differ from clutching the results?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 24–26 Solomon concludes that there is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in one's labor, and that this enjoyment is from the hand of God. How does this verse reframe ordinary work and daily bread, and how does it differ from both a love of money and a contempt for honest labor?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here the chapter turns, and the first real light of the book breaks through. Solomon concludes that there is nothing better for a person than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil, and then he adds the decisive phrase: this is from the hand of God (2:24). The very thing he could not manufacture by reaching and building turns out to be a gift, received rather than seized. This is the gospel shape of contentment.

Notice how this corrects two opposite errors at once. Against the love of money and endless acquisition, it says the goal is not to amass more but to enjoy the ordinary bread and work in front of you. Against a gloomy contempt for honest labor and earthly pleasure, it says that eating, drinking, and finding satisfaction in work are good and God-given. The Christian is neither a greedy hoarder nor a joyless ascetic, but a grateful receiver.

Verse 25 underlines that apart from God even the enjoying cannot truly happen. The capacity to taste the goodness of a meal or the satisfaction of a finished task is itself a gift He gives. This is why the same gardens that felt like vanity in verse 11 can become joy in verse 24; the difference is whether they are grasped as ultimate or received as gifts from a generous Father.

Lead the class to see that this is not a prosperity message promising wealth, nor a call to despise good things. It is the rediscovery that simple, daily gladness is holy ground when it is received from God's hand. Solomon spent unimaginable wealth to learn what a humble believer can have for free: the quiet contentment of bread, work, and gratitude.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Enjoyment of food, drink, and work is a gift from God's hand (2:24)
- This corrects the love of money and endless acquisition
- It equally corrects contempt for honest labor and good gifts
- The Christian is a grateful receiver, not a hoarder or an ascetic
- Apart from God even the capacity to enjoy is impossible (2:25)
- Simple daily gladness becomes holy when received from God

Discussion Prompts

- What does Solomon say is the source of true enjoyment in 2:24?
- How does this verse correct both greed and joyless gloom?
- What ordinary gift could you begin receiving consciously from God's hand?

Question 8

Student Question:

Solomon says that without God even the eating and enjoying cannot truly happen. Think of an ordinary gift in your life, a meal, a task, a night of rest. How might receiving it consciously as a gift from God's hand change the way you experience it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This reflection asks students to practice what verse 24 teaches by taking an ordinary gift and receiving it consciously from God. Solomon says that without God we cannot truly eat or enjoy (2:25), which means the difference between a meal swallowed in a hurry and a meal savored with gratitude is often the awareness that it came from the Father of lights.

Encourage students to choose something specific and humble: the first cup of coffee, a hot shower, a child's laugh, the satisfaction of a job done well, a night of unbroken sleep. These pass through our days almost unnoticed. The spiritual discipline is to pause and recognize each as a gift, not a given, and to let gratitude rise.

This is deeply practical and quietly transforming. A heart that receives ordinary things as gifts is a heart being healed of the restless grasping that drove Solomon's despair. Thanksgiving reorders our relationship to everything we touch, turning consumers into worshipers. We stop demanding that the gift satisfy us ultimately and begin enjoying it for what it is.

Invite students to commit to one small practice this week, perhaps naming three gifts each evening or praying gratitude before a meal with real attention. The goal is not a technique but a posture, the open-handed receiving that lets daily life become a steady stream of grace acknowledged.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Without God we cannot truly enjoy even simple things (2:25)
- Gratitude transforms an ordinary gift into worship
- Receiving gifts as gifts heals restless grasping
- Thanksgiving turns consumers into worshipers
- The aim is a posture of open-handed receiving, not a technique
- Small daily practices of gratitude reshape the heart over time

Discussion Prompts

- What ordinary gift do you tend to overlook?
- How might consciously thanking God for it change the experience?
- What one practice of gratitude could you begin this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 2 shows that wisdom, pleasure, and toil under the sun all end at the same grave, yet enjoyment is a gift God gives to the one who pleases Him while the sinner is set to gathering and heaping up. How do the Lord's words about treasures in heaven in Matthew 6:19–21, and Christ being made our wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30, lift this chapter's despair into living hope, and what does it mean that God Himself is the giver who must be feared and obeyed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, gathering the whole chapter and lifting it toward Christ. Ecclesiastes 2 has shown that wisdom, pleasure, and toil under the sun all arrive at the same grave (2:14–16), and that enjoyment is a gift God gives to the one who pleases Him, while to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and heaping only to hand it to another (2:26). The chapter ends with God Himself as the dividing line: everything depends on standing rightly before Him.

The Lord Jesus speaks directly to Solomon's despair when He says, do not lay up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, but lay up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–21). Solomon's whole grief was that earthly treasure cannot escape decay or the grave or the unworthy heir. Jesus reveals a treasury beyond the reach of all three. The man who could not keep his wealth from passing to a stranger is answered by the Savior who secures our treasure where nothing can touch it.

Paul completes the picture: Christ is the wisdom of God, and He is made unto us wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). The wisdom Solomon prized could not defeat death, but the wisdom of God in Christ has emptied the tomb. Where Ecclesiastes can only say that the wise man dies like the fool, the gospel announces that the one who is in Christ will be raised. The despair of the closed horizon under the sun is broken open by the risen Lord above it.

Yet note carefully that God remains the giver who must be feared and obeyed (2:26). This is no faith without obedience and no once-saved-always-saved presumption. The gift of enjoyment goes to the one who pleases Him, the one who walks in reverent, obedient faith. The chapter's hope is not that we relax our discipleship but that we anchor it in the God who alone gives meaning, joy, and a treasure the grave cannot take. We come to that God on His terms, believing and obeying the gospel, and we continue in faithful fellowship with Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All earthly pursuits under the sun end at the same grave (2:14–16)
- Enjoyment is given to the one who pleases God, not seized by the sinner (2:26)
- Jesus secures treasure in heaven beyond decay, grave, and heir (Matthew 6:19–21)
- Christ is made our wisdom and has conquered the grave (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30)
- God remains the giver who must be feared and obeyed, not presumed upon
- Hope here is no faith-only or once-saved-always-saved comfort but reverent, obedient faith
- The risen Lord breaks open the closed horizon of under the sun

Discussion Prompts

- How does Matthew 6:19–21 answer Solomon's grief over earthly treasure?
- What does it mean that Christ is made unto us wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30)?
- Why does the gift go to the one who pleases and fears God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across the whole chapter, Solomon tested everything the heart chases and found that only what comes from God's hand brings joy that lasts. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using this passage to reshape what you treasure, what you fear, and where you look for satisfaction this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone draws the whole chapter into the student's walk with Christ. Solomon tested everything the heart chases, pleasure, achievement, wisdom, wealth, and found that only what comes from God's hand brings lasting joy. The question asks each student to name one specific way the Lord Jesus is using this passage to reshape what they treasure, what they fear, and where they look for satisfaction.

This is intentionally personal and concrete. The danger of a chapter like this is to nod in agreement and change nothing. So press for specifics. Has the Lord exposed a particular idol, a pursuit you were asking to be God? Has He eased an anxiety about an outcome you cannot control? Has He awakened gratitude for an ordinary gift you had stopped noticing? Name it.

Tie the transformation explicitly to Christ. It is not mere resolve to be more content; it is the Lord Jesus, the wisdom of God and the keeper of our treasure in heaven, doing formative work in us through His Word. The same Savior who broke the grave that ended Solomon's every story is reordering our loves so that we treasure what lasts and fear the God who gives.

Close the lesson by inviting students to carry one concrete change into the week. Perhaps it is a daily practice of gratitude, perhaps the release of a controlling anxiety, perhaps a reallocation of energy toward treasure in heaven. The goal is a heart shaped a little more like Christ's, finding its satisfaction not under the sun but in the God who reigns above it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The chapter calls for concrete change, not mere agreement
- Name the specific idol, fear, or longing God has exposed
- Transformation is the work of Christ through His Word, not self-effort
- Christ reorders our loves toward what lasts
- The aim is a heart formed a little more like His

- Satisfaction is found in God above the sun, not in things under it

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way this chapter has reshaped what you treasure?
- What fear or anxiety is the Lord asking you to release to Him?
- What concrete change will you carry into this week?