

## **Intro: I'd be happy if...**

I'm going to start by asking you the big question that these verses are all about tonight. Here it is... What will it take to make you happy?

Finish the sentence... "I'll be happy when..." Fill in the blank. What is it for you? Hold that thought.

We're in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes tonight and you'll need it open on your lap as we go through the first 11 verses.

The guy who wrote this book calls himself Qoheleth, (1:1) meaning something like "the preacher man". There's a lot of debate about who he really was but it's clear in these first chapters that he is deliberately taking on the persona of wise old king Solomon – so that's who we need to have in our minds as we study this tonight.

Solomon was, to all intents and purposes, the most successful king that Israel ever had. He took over from his dad, the mighty king David, and before long Israel was really on the map.

His kingdom became immensely wealthy – 2 Chronicles 1:15 tells us "The king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills."

Imagine that! ...everywhere you looked in the city you saw gold shining in the sunlight!

## **The Quest**

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the preacher man has set himself off on a quest. This book is all about trying to work out the meaning of life.

The world that Solomon lives in is filled with questions and riddles and mystery. He writes as an old man looking back on his life and wanting to pass on what he has discovered.

And what's his assessment? Look at chapter 1:13, "I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

What's the point? Where can you find REAL purpose, contentment, fulfilment and joy? In simple terms... what will make you happy?

I wonder what your answer would be right now.

£1000, 10,000, 1 million? A new ipod, a new phone, A new car? Some good exam results? A place at the University of your choice? A first class honours degree? A new girlfriend, A new boyfriend, A husband, a child?

Part of our human condition seems to be that we're constantly living in this state of "I'll be happy when...?", and we keep on adding to the list and adding to the list... I've got my 4 bedroom house, but wouldn't it be great to have 5 bedrooms, I've got my bigger house but I'll be happier when I can move to a better post code, when I've got a bigger car, a sports car for weekends, a holiday home somewhere nice... until we die... never having got there, never having reached the point where we're completely satisfied and contented.

A theologian and philosopher called Peter Kreeft summed it up this way, he said it's like we're on a wild goose chase... without a goose!

Is it possible to find real contentment and happiness in the pleasures offered by the world we live in? Solomon takes up the challenge big time on our behalf – chapter 2:1, “<sup>1</sup> I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless.”

Solomon has conducted the ultimate experiment in this area, he’s done it *large!* And then he was kind enough to write up the results for us.

Here’s the thing. Every new generation goes down this road. Some of you are young (like me) and you might be sitting there thinking “things are different now, the world has changed, what does a guy who lived 3000 years ago know about my world?”

But the truth is that that’s how every generation thinks. Listen to Solomon in chapter 1:9, “~~X~~ What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”

Sure, we invent new toys and technologies to entertain ourselves, but the search for meaning and satisfaction in life just keeps on re-hashing it’s theories over and over... someone comes up with a new philosophy... but it’s not new, it’s been thought of before... people don’t change, every new generation falls in and out of love and goes down all the same avenues to find reason.

Someone described it like this. It’s like every generation jumps onto the exercise bike of life and pedals away with all their might, getting nowhere... then they get off and they are replaced by the next generation who laugh about how they made no progress and pedal away with all their might, going nowhere... and so it goes on.

Every generation fills their lives with all sorts of things to try and find meaning, to scratch where they really itch, but they keep on failing.

Will you take Solomon at his word about this topic or will you arrogantly assume that you know better?

### **The itch that couldn’t be scratched.**

Solomon has every resource at his disposal. Let’s look at the evidence

First he tries comedy. Verse 2, <sup>2</sup> “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?”

Solomon thinks, “wouldn’t it be great if I could just laugh all the time?”

Do you like comedy? I love comedy... I love watching the good old English comedy of years gone by! I can watch blackadder over and over again! We have a good collection of Eddie Izzard and Bill Bailey at home... I’ve heard the jokes so many times but they still crack me up, Sarah took me out for my 34<sup>th</sup> birthday last year to see Dylan Moran doing stand-up... fantastic! I love to laugh! Perhaps you think “I’d be happy if I could just laugh all the time”.

Next he turns to the bottle! Verse 3, <sup>3</sup> “I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.”

Wouldn’t it be great to drink whatever you want to all the time? I’ve never been a fan of wines, but a few years ago I discovered the Alabama Slammer! You might think I’m a big girl, but they’re great... Southern Comfort, Amaretto, Grenadine and fresh OJ... a masterpiece!

Solomon would have had cellars full of the finest wines from around the world brought to him on his fleet of merchant ships. Not the cheap old plonk or the watered down stuff, the really good stuff.

Wouldn't it be great to have the finest drinks on tap? A cocktail bar at your disposal? A cellar full of the best wines money can buy?

Next he turns to Property. V4, "4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards."

Do you like nice houses? Would you like to have an amazing home?

I love watching grand designs... Paul Simpson and I once planned to graduate University and start building timber-frame houses! I settled for building an extension onto my house... I added an extra 2/3s onto our house in Liverpool, I knocked down walls... I love interior design... we love home improvements don't we? You can't turn on the TV with there being some sort of Home makeover program on!

The royal Albert hall, opened in 1871. This incredible, imposing structure that can hold 9000 guests was built in less than 4 years. Solomon had even more resources and even more labour available... and his ornate palace took 13 years to complete! It was sweet!

Wouldn't it be great to have a sweet property?

Next Solomon went for gardening! V5, "5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees."

Don't you love beautiful gardens? Places of peace, beauty and rest?

I think we love gardens because that's the environment we were designed to live in. God put the first people, Adam and Eve in a perfect garden.

Imagine the sweet smell of flowers on the warm breeze, branches loaded with ripe fruit, the trickling of water in a stream, the glassy reflection of a beautiful lake... everything green and lush!

I love walking through the gardens in the Great Park on a Summer afternoon, don't you?

Wouldn't it be great to have your own little paradise?

Next, Solomon goes for leisure, v7, "I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me."

Perhaps you think "I'd be happy if I had a team of people who catered for your every need?" Your own adoring posse! Like a Rapper! What would you go for? I'd have a personal chef (or 2) and a masseur! What would you go for? A stylist, a tailor, a brewer, a gardener?

Wouldn't it be great to have a team of people who did for you all the jobs you didn't want to?

It's estimated that the food provision for Solomon's household was enough to feed 35000 people! (1 kings 4:22-23) That's a lot of staff!

Do you like pets? I'm ok with cats and dogs... Sarah has always dreamed (since she was a little girl) or having a horse... she can keep dreaming!

Solomon had 12000 horses (1 kings 4:26)! That's a lot of horses!

Perhaps you think "I'd be happy if I had loads of money?" Verse 8, "I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces."

Solomon was *properly* rich. Not millionaire rich, or even billionaire rich... more the kind of "I can buy countries" kind of rich! His income from taxes alone was almost 23 tonnes of gold every year! He had so much that he didn't know what to do with it.

Wouldn't it be great if you never had to think about what you spent? You see it, you want it... it's yours. Never check your bank balance again...

And then there's music, v8, "I acquired men and women singers," Solomon owned the top bands of his day.

How would you like to have U2 at your beck and call?

Do you like music? How good would it be to always be able to hear your favourite bands play live whenever you wanted? Just say the word and they set up in your house and serenade you! They write new songs for your benefit! How good would it be to enjoy the best music *to the max*?

And last, but by no means least, Solomon turns to sex... And he really goes for it.

V8, "and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man."

A question to the married (rhetorical – i.e. please don't shout out!), do you like sex? Do you enjoy physical intimacy? How good would it be to have sex on tap?

Solomon went for this in an incredible way! Get this... He had 700 wives! And as if that wasn't enough he had an additional 300 concubines! (They're like girlfriend/strippers): 1000 semi-finalists from one of those "next top model" programs on the TV!

He could indulge any fantasy he wanted, whenever he wanted... he had 1000 women just waiting for him to come up with new ideas!

Perhaps some of you might have amassed a similar internet harem, but Solomon had it for real. Maybe you think "I'd be happy if I could have sex whenever I wanted it?"

Solomon indulged himself in every area he could think of... v10, "<sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure."

And what was his conclusion? None of it brought satisfaction.

V11, "<sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

All of it was empty and unsatisfying.

**Listen...** If Ecclesiastes is going to teach you anything, you need to believe Solomon's conclusion. Not a single pleasure that this world could offer him could really scratch where he was itching, he couldn't find meaning in any of it... it all just led to despair... like trying to catch and keep the vapour from your breath in your hands on a cold winter's day... is this true?

Freddie Mercury died at age 45 in 1991. He has been voted the top male vocalist of all time, he had world-wide fame and fortune, and to all appearances had everything his heart desired. He said,

*"You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man. And that is the most bitter type of loneliness, success has brought me world idolisation and millions of pounds. But it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need: A loving, ongoing relationship".*

### **The right way to enjoy pleasures.**

So why don't these things satisfy? What's the deal? What's the way out of this wild goose chase without a goose?

What's going on here? Why are some of you sitting there and you don't really believe Solomon?

For the answers we need to turn to the NT, to the first chapter of Romans which was read to us earlier.

<sup>18</sup>The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, <sup>19</sup>since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

<sup>20</sup>For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

<sup>21</sup>For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Our natural inclination is to suppress the truth... truth has a hard time penetrating our thick heads! We were designed and made to be worshippers. (to worship means to give ourselves to someone or something) But instead of worshipping God, the one who made us, we give ourselves to all sorts of other things (could be anything, money, power, sex, good times, alcohol)... things that He himself actually made!

The human heart is an idol factory... we make idols out of all kinds of things without even thinking about it! ...And when our worship is directed towards *anything* other than our creator, when we get it the wrong way round, we find no satisfaction or meaning.

Paul goes on...

<sup>22</sup>Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

It's like this: God is a loving Father and we are His children. And he gives us all these great things as gifts... and rather than enjoying these things *with* Him, like rebellious children we grab everything, tell God to shove off and run away. We foolishly think that with all our stuff we no longer need our Father any more. But we don't know how to use the stuff correctly and it just frustrates us because none of it makes us happy.

God says "I know how you should use all of that stuff, I made it for you and if you use it in relationship with me - I'll show you how it works so you can actually enjoy it."

See, this section from Ecclesiastes is not here to give us a moral lesson... people have often taken it that way... "Don't do what Solomon did... you must flee from the lure of pleasure to be good boys and girls!"

I was brought up on that kind of teaching – perhaps some of you were? "Don't have alcohol (don't even go to bar or a pub!), don't have sex, don't listen to rock music and above all, don't laugh!"

If it feels good... repent!

The Bible does not teach us to pursue morality! Morality says "Make lots of rules about not doing fun things because fun things will wind you up in trouble"

Think about it, the most moral and religious people of His day were the ones who killed Jesus! He was too free and happy for them! He used to hang out with prostitutes and he went to parties with sinners, he had fun with His friends and He had a sense of humour!

The religious guys thought that God should behave like they did. Jesus didn't look like them and He didn't keep their rules... so they had Him crucified.

Don't pursue morality... pursue pleasure!  
 Yep! That's right, pursue pleasure... but pursue it from the right source!

We are to be pleasure *seekers*. We were made for pleasure. It's how we're designed... that's why we prefer a delicious meal to a blow to the base of the skull with a hammer! That's why we'd rather sit in a hot-tub than crush our fingers in a bench-vice!

God had wired up is such a way that we love to enjoy His creation.

The problem is that we're lazy!  
 CS Lewis (the author of the Narnia books) preached the following words:

*"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

We could have a feast but we settle for gluttony.  
 We could have a party but we settle for drunkenness  
 We could laugh but we settle for coarse joking.  
 We could have all our sins forgiven but we settle for trying to earn righteousness with morality!

We should commit ourselves not to settle for anything less than God. If you're a committed pleasure seeker you will keep going until you meet God.

Ps16:11 tells us that God is the *source* of pleasure and He *is* our pleasure.

"You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

Your goal should be to enjoy the life that God has given you by drawing near to Him... and then the Creator Himself will help you to enjoy His creation!

**When we enjoy the gifts God gives us HIS WAY, we find satisfaction.**

Here a secret: Listen, what will keep you from sin? Satisfaction! Satisfied people don't need to sin! Do I like to eat? Yes. Can it become gluttony? Yes. Do I stop eating? No! etc...  
 Do I like alcoholic drinks? Yes Can they lead to drunkenness? Yes. Do I go T-total? No!

You don't need to push the limits and sin when you are *satisfied*.  
 Sin is actually no fun at all! It results in emptiness, shame, guilt and all kinds of horrible consequences! But enjoying God's gifts in God's way results in satisfaction.

I don't need to get drunk, I need to just enjoy my favourite drink.  
 I don't need to be a glutton, I need to feast in God's presence with God's people.  
 I don't need to abstain from sex, I need to get married and then exclusively chase my wife!

Enjoy your life. Do everything Solomon did. But don't seek meaning and satisfaction from them. God wants you to be a liberated, free and happy people. Enjoy God's creation... then you can avoid sin!

Sin will never lead to happiness, joy and satisfaction.  
 The only way out of Solomon's conundrum is to be joyous, happy, filled, satisfied and pleasure-seeking people who don't give up until you get it all from the right hand of God. Ps16:11.