

SPIRITUAL FITNESS: CONTENTMENT

(Ecclesiastes 2.1-26 and Matthew 6.25-34)

Introduction

In the summer of 1980, I was waiting on A-level results, clinging to the remote hope that I might somehow scrape the grades I had not worked for. Needless to say, I got one E and two fails.

So I thought, "I'll get a job, and when I do, I'll earn some money and be able to buy stuff and do more." A few months later I opened a letter from a desperate employer to read these beautiful words, "Dear Mr. Lambert, we are delighted to inform you..." Now life was going to get interesting.

So I started work as a Trainee Manager in a frozen food store (a bit like Iceland) and for a short while it was brilliant. The adrenalin, the challenge, but mostly if I'm honest the tea breaks, lunch breaks and the pay slip at the end of the month... But then the novelty of that wore off too.

So I thought "Maybe if I found a girlfriend, life would start to take off." And miraculously, I somehow managed to sweet talk a young lady who wasn't all that picky (not Kathie by the way) into an awkward few dates but it was no Mills and Boon romance...

Because one day we had a big argument about nothing, (I still think I was right by the way) and before I knew it, I had been dumped for another boy with greasy hair and zits – but, crucially, who owned a second-hand Ford Escort. I sat down that day and asked myself, "What is the secret to contentment?"

Everywhere I go, I find that people spend their whole lives dreaming about the next job, the next house, the next extension or new kitchen, the next promotion, the next relationship, the next holiday, the next buzz. But when they get there, they find it doesn't satisfy them in the way they hoped it might. Can you relate to this?

This is what Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is about.

Money can buy you virtually anything, but love isn't one of them and neither is contentment. You can have a full wallet, a full larder, a full stomach, a full house, a full diary, a full career, a full wine cellar, and a bed full of beautiful women - and still have an empty soul.

Solomon's Three Stages of Life

Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, son of the great King David. He was famous for his wisdom and he wrote three books in the Bible. It looks like he wrote them at three different stages of his life.

The first is a book we call the Song of Songs. When I first read it I thought it should be called the snog of snogs. It's basically a collection of steamy love poems. You read it and think "this guy either needs a cold shower or he should get a room." It's full of erotic imagery and is packed with fantasies that he and his bride have for each other. They yearn for intimacy. It's safe to assume that he was a young man, maybe early twenties, when he wrote it.

Intriguingly, the first book of Kings tells us that Solomon wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs, which corresponds almost exactly to the number of women in his life. Some have even speculated that, because the number of songs and number of women is so similar, he may have written a new song for each of his women. Maybe he did.

And if that is so there's probably a reason why only one song made it into the Bible and it's because only one woman was ever God's choice for him, and that's the only one he should have married.

In his 30s and 40s, Solomon collected and compiled sayings and axioms. We know that he must have been a dad with children and teenagers when he put the book of Proverbs together because it's a manual of advice from a father to a son.

All the proverbs are muddled up. It would be nice if there was a section on laziness, a section on money, a section on gossip etc. But they're all cobbled together.

It's exactly like a parent giving advice to a grown-up son or daughter as he or she heads off for university. "Don't forget to eat plenty of green vegetables.

And make sure you change your socks every day. And don't buy stuff from door-to-door salesmen. And don't forget to wrap up warm in winter."

It reminds me actually of something a teenage girl once said to her mother. "Mum, what did you get up to when you were my age that makes you so worried about me now?"

The problem is, Solomon had tons of wisdom from God for other people, including for his own children, but he was very unwise in his own life – and, as a result, his kids ended up further away from God than even he did. The best way to ensure your children walk with God is to walk with God yourself.

I think Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes when he was a grandfather. he's at the end of the journey; looking back.

And as he weighs up his life, he realises he's done it all wrong. The pleasure, the learning, the fame, the grand building projects – *all of it* was good in itself, but because he was a workaholic, because it consumed him, it took his focus off God.

1 Timothy 6.6 says; "Godliness with contentment is great gain." Solomon didn't value godliness, so he found no contentment. So he concluded that his life was meaningless and empty.

I don't know if there is any discovery more depressing than to realise at the end of the only life we have that it's all been wasted.

Giving It Both Barrels

Solomon is a man with exceptional talents. He is born into a life of wealth and privilege. He has every opportunity possible to live life to the full.

And in Ecclesiastes 2 he shows how he gave it both barrels. He reels off an impressive catalogue of all the things he did to maximise his happiness.

This is Solomon's bucket list – and he ticks every line. He tries partying (v1), laughing (v2), drinking (v3), engineering (4), gardening (v5), creating (v6), acquiring (v7), womanising (8), studying (v12) and working (v19).

We can glean a bit of detail on all this from the first book of Kings. It says he lived in sumptuous palaces. He strolled about in beautiful landscaped gardens. He constructed a private zoo displaying exotic animals from all over the world. He amassed a fleet of cars - 12,000 Egyptian thoroughbreds (the best that money could buy) and 1,400 chariots.

Royalty from all over the then known world travelled to Jerusalem to admire the splendour and finery of his kingdom. He sent them home dizzy from the experience and lavished with extravagant gifts.

He held banquets serving the world's most luxurious and sumptuous food and drink imaginable with top celebrity guest lists. Everyone wanted to be Solomon and everybody envied what he had.

He was waited on by a personal staff estimated at 10,000 servants, each trained and dedicated to indulge his every whim. He only had to click his fingers and he would be entertained by the country's best singers, musicians and comedians.

He drank the finest wines in pure gold goblets. Prosperity in his reign was such that silver was considered worthless.

He could have unlimited sex, whenever he felt like it, with any one of his 1,000 or so wives and partners. He spared himself no sensual pleasure.

He had the power to do anything he wanted. And he sat on a throne of ivory and gold, exalted on six steps, adorned with twelve hand-carved lions, and surrounded by hundreds of shields in hammered gold. Yes, Solomon was the godfather of kitsch.

In fact, he says "I became greater *by far* than anyone in Jerusalem before me... (v9). That's not hubris. It's a fact. His engineering feats were legendary; grand building projects, fortress cities, impressive roads and canals...

"Yet (v11) 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."

Here are the three paradoxes:

- He has a brain the size of a planet but cannot make sense of anything.
- He lives in a playboy mansion but gets no real pleasure from it.
- He has a dream career but never once finds job satisfaction.

At the end of the day he looks at everything he is, everything he has, and everything he's achieved and says "whatever."

The private jet, the luxury yacht, the diamond chandeliers, the personal golf course, the exclusive art collection, the stately homes, the swimming pools, the high-class vineyards –all in a spiritual vacuum... It just leaves him unfulfilled.

Why is that? It's because (and here's the key) he tries to find happiness by enjoying everything he has, independently of any connection with God. He doesn't even mention God until v24.

Phil Collins is one of the world's best known and most successful musicians. He had more US Top 40 singles than any other artist during the 1980s. He has sold over 150 million albums worldwide. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. His fortune is estimated at over £100 million. But his three marriages all ended in unhappiness and divorce.

In an interview shortly after his third marriage breakdown he said this: "Night after night I find myself lying on the bed, staring out of a skylight at grey skies, rueing my life. I'm all alone, save for my good friends Johnnie Walker and Grey Goose." Then he added, "The huge hole, the void, I had to fill somehow. I filled it with booze. And it nearly killed me."

He's got everything people dream of. Would you swap your life for his?

Ending

We're not going to end on that note though because the chapter doesn't. It finishes slightly upbeat.

Finally, Solomon mentions the "G word". Verse 24: "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?"

As soon as he brings God into the picture, the mood lifts. He's saying that life is given to us by God for our pleasure. When God made the heavens and the earth and the trees and the birds and the fish and the beasts and human beings he saw it was good, very good. It is.

1 Timothy 6.17 says "God richly provides us with all we need for our enjoyment." Take pleasure in what you do, and enjoy life, live it happily and to the full, because it's a gift from God who loves you and wants to bless you and fill you with good things.

And then he says this: (v26) "To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness..."

Hold that right there. What he's saying here is that God shows favour to those who make him their treasure.

Things like food and work and friends and laughter and leisure are good. That doesn't mean you can find security and self-worth in these things. Solomon tried that and it was a dead end. "But" he says, "to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

Your security and self-worth are in knowing Jesus Christ and following him. Real enjoyment of life comes when we follow God's guidelines for living. Which Solomon did not.

And those who shut God out all their lives end up with nothing. The day after you die, having had no spiritual interest at all your whole life, what have you got to show for it? And what is there to say to God?

What about you? Are you building your whole life on perishable pursuits or on the firm foundation of knowing God?

Let's pray...