

Ecclesiastes 2: Chasing Pleasure

Port Charlotte Campus

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Introduction

In this series through Ecclesiastes, we're exploring what it means to chase after the wrong things—and today we're talking about chasing **passions**.

As a worship pastor, I often say: **worship pastors are just singing preachers**. What we sing is a form of preaching but set to a melody—it teaches, it sticks, it shapes. That's why last week's song, *Chasing the Wind*, was an original song written for our church for this very series—to help us remember that *some things look full but leave us empty*.

I've had admiration for a lot of great songwriters who have come before me. One of the most honest voices in music history? **Johnny Cash**.

He sang about faith, addiction, regret, and redemption. He had it all—fame, fortune, success, and women. At the height of his career, he had a mansion in Nashville, a Rolls Royce, gold records on the wall... but his soul was unraveling.

Years later, he sang the haunting lyric:

“You can have it all, my empire of dirt.” — Johnny Cash

That wasn't just a line. It was a **lament**.

Cash had chased everything the world offered and found it didn't satisfy.

And 3,000 years before Johnny Cash, **King Solomon** said the same thing.

Who Needs This Message?

We live in the most *entertained*, *wealthy*, and *medicated* generation in history—and yet we're still anxious and depressed.

- In **2023**, the U.S. ranked *23rd in global happiness*.

- In **2024**, we hit a heartbreaking record: *over 100,000 overdose deaths*.
- A Gallup poll reported that *1 in 3 Americans feels anxious or depressed most days*—despite having more access to comfort, connection, and convenience than any generation before.

We keep chasing:

- Success for our kids
- Likes and followers
- Status, freedom, or comfort

But our souls are growing thinner.

This message is for **anyone building an empire of dirt**—and wondering if there’s more to life than this.

Solomon’s Chase – Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

Solomon had **everything**: unmatched wealth, power, success, and opportunity. Ecclesiastes 2 is his *journal entry*—a personal reflection on his pursuit of satisfaction.

Laughter & Pleasure

“I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” —Ecclesiastes 2:1–2

Solomon used laughter to cover up emptiness—just like we often do. We turn to comedy, sarcasm, reels, and memes to distract ourselves. Many comedians (Robin Williams, John Belushi, Chris Farley) made the world laugh—but battled deep sadness.

Reflection: Am I using laughter or pleasure to cover up deeper pain? Where do I run to when I want to avoid the ache?

Wine & Folly

“I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.” —Ecclesiastes 2:3

Solomon wasn’t partying—he was **numbing**. Escapism is modern too: endless scrolling, daily wine, prescription misuse, online shopping, or even busy schedules that keep us distracted.

Reflection: What am I using to escape or numb? Is there a pain I’m trying to silence instead of heal?

Projects, Parks, Pools

“I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.” —Ecclesiastes 2:4–6

Solomon built his own version of paradise—but still felt empty. We do the same: dream homes, curated online lives, perfect plans. But when the dust settles, we can still feel hollow.

Reflection: Am I trying to build something impressive on the outside to avoid the emptiness on the inside?

Possessions & Wealth

“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. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.” —Ecclesiastes 2:7–8a

Solomon received 666 talents of gold annually—today that’s over \$1.5 billion. Silver was so common, it lost its value. He had everything. Today, it might be name brands, dream cars, or technology—not because we need them, but because of what they say about us.

Reflection: Am I finding my worth in what I have? What do my desires for more really say about my heart?

Entertainment & Sex

“I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart.” — Ecclesiastes 2:8b “He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.” —1 Kings 11:3

Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. If that didn’t satisfy, more never will. This is the lie of sin: *just one more*. But chasing more pleasure leads to more emptiness when it replaces God.

Reflection: Where am I seeking satisfaction outside of God’s design? Am I believing the lie that more will finally be enough?

Fame, Success, & Hard Work

“I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.” —Ecclesiastes 2:9–10 “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.” — Ecclesiastes 2:11

Solomon reached the top and found it empty. He didn’t say, “It was bad.” He said, “It was meaningless.”

Reflection: What ladder am I climbing right now? Is it leaning against the right wall?

Real Life Examples

- The student chasing GPA and degrees, only to wonder, “Is this it?”

- The parent pushing kids through relentless activities, hoping their success will give life meaning—but the whole family is exhausted.
 - The young adult living for the next trip, the next job, the next post—but still feels aimless.
 - The person using relationships, flings, or porn to cope with loneliness—but waking up emptier every time.
 - The achiever who thought one more promotion, paycheck, or possession would make them content—but still can't rest.
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Sin Is Subtle

No one wakes up and says, “I want to build my life on empty things.” But that’s what sin does—it whispers. It starts as comfort, escape, or pleasure—then becomes dependency. It looks harmless until it owns you. Like saltwater for a thirsty soul, sin satisfies for a moment—then destroys. Idols promise peace but steal your soul.

Before long, you don’t even realize you’ve drifted—until you’re far from shore.

Application

1. Stop Chasing What Can't Save

Solomon had more than we ever will. And he still came up empty.

- Stop settling for temporary highs that leave you dry.
- End the cycle of shame, escape, and self-reliance.

Reflection: What well am I still drinking from that keeps leaving me dry? What do I need to surrender today?

2. Start Pursuing the One Who Can—Jesus

He is our daily bread, our living water, our peace. You don't just need to sweep your life clean—you need it **filled** with the Holy Spirit.

- Read your Bible
- Join a group
- Serve, pray, worship
- Live surrendered

Reflection: Where have I tried to fill the void on my own? What does it look like to pursue Jesus with my whole life this week?

Resolution – The Gospel

Late in life, Johnny Cash walked into **Nickajack Cave** to die. Addicted. Hopeless. Alone. But there, in the darkness, he felt God's presence.

He said it was like a whisper in the dark—not condemnation, but invitation. He walked out alive. Broken, yes. But with hope.

You don't have to build an empire of dirt. You don't have to fix yourself first. You don't have to pretend anymore.

You were made for God and His purposes. He's not asking you to run harder. He's inviting you to *rest*.

Invitation

Maybe today is your **Nickajack Cave moment**. You're tired. You've been chasing, pretending, performing—but you know you're empty.

Jesus isn't standing over you with shame. He's standing with open arms. Whispering to your soul:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” —Matthew 11:28

You don't have to wait until you're worthy. You're not loved because you believe—you believe because **He first loved you**.

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” — Romans 5:8

His love didn't start the moment you finally got it together.

It started long before you even knew to look for Him.

And it's His love that will carry you through to the very end.

The love that found Johnny in a cave... is reaching for you now.

Let go of the empire of dirt. Come home. Jesus is waiting.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Scripture to Memorize

Ecclesiastes 2:11

“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.”

1. What is something you've chased that you thought would bring happiness—but didn't?

"I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.' But that also proved to be meaningless. 'Laughter,' I said, 'is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?'" **Ecclesiastes 2:1–2**

2. When life feels heavy or overwhelming, what do you tend to use to escape or numb the pain?

"I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives." **Ecclesiastes 2:3**

3. Have you ever achieved something you worked hard for—only to realize it didn't satisfy? What did that teach you?

"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." **Ecclesiastes 2:11**

4. Is there an area of your life where you've been building something impressive on the outside, but still feel hollow inside?

"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them." **Ecclesiastes 2:4–5**

5. Where are you tempted to believe that "just a little more" (money, entertainment, success) will finally satisfy you?

"I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart." **Ecclesiastes 2:8b**

6. What "well" are you drinking from that keeps leaving you dry—and what would it look like to pursue Jesus instead?

"Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." **Matthew 11:28**