

Life's Too Short to Drink Bad Coffee **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26**

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How do you like this title, *Life's Too Short to Drink Bad Coffee*? I like it because I like coffee. Any excuse to drink good coffee, I'm for it. Coffee is one of God's gifts to mankind. I remember being in seminary, living in Phoenix in 1990. We were near Arizona State University and a guy I knew asked me if I wanted to go to a coffee house restaurant. I said, "A what?" "It's a restaurant and all they serve is coffee." I remember thinking what a stupid idea that was. That'll never work.

I live in a house divided. I am a coffee lover. I have a really great coffeemaker and each day is a wonderful reminder of the goodness of God. My wife Jennifer is mostly a hater. I don't understand her antipathy toward coffee. My theory on her hatred stems from my own experience. My parents drank a little coffee growing up. This was back when all I remember is Folgers coffee in a red can. We had an old drip-style coffeemaker. That's the kind of coffee you get when you're waiting for your tires to be rotated. That is nasty coffee. Low grade. Sludge. I love coffee, but I hate that kind of coffee.

Somewhere in my 20s I started drinking Starbucks' Mocha Frappuccinos—a more refined coffee experience combined with chocolate. I liked them very much. That led to hot mochas, which led to hot regular coffee. Now I love all coffee. Good coffee. Real coffee. I love the smell. I love the flavor. I love the romance of it. Anyone with me? Sometimes I find myself thinking at night, *Hey, when I wake up, I get to drink coffee.*

Have I just confessed sin to you? Is it wrong for a Christian to greatly enjoy something like coffee? Might the scuttlebutt be that perhaps Pastor Steve enjoys his coffee too much? Perhaps it's too important to him. Might even be an idol. And aren't we supposed to deny ourselves and follow Jesus? Enjoying coffee could be a slippery slope into loving the world and the things in the world.

And here we are in Ecclesiastes where Solomon says in chapter 2 that he tried everything the world had to offer and it was all vanity. Wouldn't coffee be included in "vanity"? What a mess we can make of all this. If you grew up fundamentalist Christian like me, you know these arguments quite well. I often think God is in heaven shaking his head and thinking, *I made coffee because I thought you'd like it.*

So what do we do with all these wonderful, beautiful, enjoyable things God built into the world around us? Can good Christians passionately pursue them? Buy them? Taste them? Enjoy them? Is that unspiritual? And how do we do so without falling into Solomon's trap of despair from these things? That's where our series on Ecclesiastes takes us.

²⁴ "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 ESV)

Our focus is verses 24-26. Note that they come off Solomon's despair at the futility of toil and profit. All the money and accumulation from all the sweat and labor has to be left to someone else (Verse 18). What's the point? You know that feeling when you sign your will or trust? It's a creepy feeling.

These verses conclude a section he began in chapter 1 exploring the normal human categories of life. Vocation. Desire. Pleasure. Money. Solomon rolls through these like a tornado in a trailer park and there's nothing seemingly left to live for.

What has been conspicuously absent from the whole book thus far is God. He is mentioned only in 1:13. The reason for this is that Solomon is pursuing meaning as if there is no God. He is squeezing the material world trying to find soul satisfaction. But all he feels is emptiness. All the money, success, wives, and power WITHOUT God produce emptiness. Futility.

But here Solomon says there is a way for us to enjoy life in the midst of the futility.

Enjoyment of Life and Material Blessings is Commended

"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." (Verse 24) Is Solomon schizophrenic? Earlier he despairs of eating, drinking, and finds no enjoyment. Now he commends it. The key is the next phrase. *"This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"* (Verses 24-25)

Apart from him. Everything he has said so far has been trying to enjoy things for their own sake or for their own pleasure. No God. Atheistic hedonism. Just the thing. Just the experience. Just the possession. What does it do for you? How do you feel afterwards? Solomon repeatedly says that it's all vanity.

But here he commends a much different approach and a much different result. He says. Eat! Drink! Enjoy! He commends three human experiences of daily life. Why? *"This is from the hand of God."* Eating. Drinking. Enjoying. These are gifts from God. When and how?

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:31) We assume so much, don't we? We have to realize God created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. God created everything that is, including our capacity for enjoyment. This means there is a divine purpose and sanction to human enjoyment of the created order. Those purposes are varied, but Romans 1 tells us all of it is intended by God to tell us what he is like.

"His invisible attributes...have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world." (Romans 1:20) So all creation is a massive self-portrait by God. Created things reflect divine spiritual glory. But there is more here. Not only does God create pleasure, he himself takes pleasure in the creation. He enjoyed it! He delighted in every aspect of his creation, coffee beans included. God loves coffee beans.

Mankind is placed within this creation with gifts of sensory receptacles which take into our bodies and pleasure centers these glorious wonders. God gave us the gift of enjoyment capacity. It's the same quality he has himself and he himself exercised over creation. And with creation, he invites us into his own divine delight in what he has made. So that as you drink really good coffee, you might say, *I enjoy this coffee.* God in heaven thinks, *I enjoy it too AND I enjoy that you are enjoying it.*

C.S. Lewis has written so brilliantly on this subject, I can't talk about it without quoting him. His book, *The Screwtape Letters* is a satirical look at two demons plotting how to destroy Christians. The lead demon says to his underling nephew demon,

"Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours...He's a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and stakes and crosses are only a façade. Or only like foam on the sea shore. Out at sea, out in His sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at his right hand are "pleasures for evermore."...He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least – sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be twisted before it's any use to us." (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 44, 118)

How did Satan twist the enjoyment of eating for example? He inserted a heresy into the temptation of Eve. He questioned the goodness of God. *"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?...God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."* (Genesis 3:2, 5) Satan whispered into Eve's ear that God wasn't good, he was withholding good. Eat without God. And she did. That moment was the first Ecclesiastes moment in history. She was Solomon before Solomon was Solomon. Idolatry isn't just bowing to things, it's seeking from things that which only God can provide. In doing so, you not only lose God but you also lose his intent that we enjoy the thing fully.

Enjoying Created Things Requires Enjoying the Creator

This is the sad plight of the materialist, the hedonist, and the atheist. Solomon describes their terrible quandary in verse 26, *"but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind."* (Ecclesiastes 2:26) The business of life for the unbeliever is described as "gathering and collecting." The materialist works and works and works, accumulates and accumulates. This is the workaholic whose goal is a net worth number. All his energies are put toward that and his hope is that when he gets there, he will be happy.

But the pile of money or hoarding of things has a harsh reality. He or she has to give all of it to someone else. Which verse 26 says is *"to the one who pleases God."* It is the meek who inherit the earth.

Now they may enjoy God's common graces but it is a provisional and incomplete enjoyment. There is something missing that the Christian discovers once she connects the dots between earthly pleasures and enjoyment and God. Every enjoyment or beauty we experience in this world is a gift from God. Listen to Romans 1 describe the disconnect sinners have between God and his created gifts.

²¹ *"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

²⁴ *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about*

God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:21-25)

For although they knew God (not in a saving way but in the spiritual awareness), they didn't do two things they should and they do one thing they shouldn't.

They fail to give God honor. This means they fail to acknowledge him. They fail to reverence him. They fail to enjoy creation in the way God prescribed. We are all Eves eating apples God forbade.

They fail to give God thanks. Here is the Ecclesiastes point. Enjoying the simple, ordinary, blessings of life requires us to see those ordinary blessings as gifts from God. Not entitlements. Not here by the random and chance mutation of atoms. Not rights or privileges. Gifts.

For something to be a gift I have to see it as something I don't deserve. If I deserve it, then I thank myself. To quote Bart Simpson praying before a meal, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." (Quoted by Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, p. 32)

Better than Bart are Paul and Augustine.

- *"...but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy."* (1 Timothy 6:17)
- *"He loves Thee too little, who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake."* (Augustine, as quoted by John Piper, *A Godward Life*, p. 20)

There's the key. We enjoy these things as gifts and calls to worship. They summon us in the midst of our pleasure to give thanks and offer praise and worship. Or as I have written elsewhere, *"Wonder at His beauty leads to worship of His glory."* (Steve DeWitt, *Eyes Wide Open*, p. 106)

The summary failure is in verse 25—they serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator. Fallen man is without relationship with God so he's left to derive his meaning and purpose from created things. But without God, over time and with the law of diminishing returns, these things lose their luster. Charles Darwin could tell you about that.

"Up to the age of 30 or beyond it, poetry of many kinds...gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare.... Formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music.... I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did.... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding out general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive.... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature." (Charles Darwin, as quoted by John Piper, *Desiring God, Revised Edition*, p. 100)

This from the man admired by the intellectual community the world over and buried with honors at Westminster Abbey. What can we say? Ecclesiastes, Darwin. Ecclesiastes.

How to Enjoy Fleeting Pleasures During Your Futile Life

Connect the gift with the giver

"For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy."
(Ecclesiastes 2:26) Wisdom and knowledge we somewhat expect to see in this list of gifts, but what about joy? Joy is a gift from God? Remember, *ex nihilo*. Everything was made by God including the human experience of joy. This is a gift from him.

The carnal man experiences joy. He drinks his coffee just like the Christian. But as he drinks it, his heart has no thanksgiving beyond the flavor itself. There's no theology when he drinks. No worship. He fails to connect his joy with God as the giver of it. Life apart from God is life that doesn't honor him or give thanks to him.

But the Christian has experienced salvation and has received by faith God's ultimate gift, Jesus. Now I understand grace and my own depravity. Gone is my sense of entitlement to anything. I deserve hell and damnation but God has given me forgiveness and eternal life. I don't deserve salvation AND I don't deserve anything else. God is grace. God is good. Every daily joy is a grace gift from him. A Christian connects all of God's gifts with God and it produces a profound thankfulness in all things. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, *"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

Think of it like we do other gifts. You probably have various gifts people have given to you over the years. Birthday. Wedding shower. Whatever. Why do we call some gifts sentimental? The gift reminds us of the person who gave it to us. Grandpa's tools. Dad's ring. Mom's bracelet. When the house is burning down, these are the things we grab as we run out the door. They hold value because of who gave them to us. We think of them as we enjoy their gift to us.

We must have a divine sentimentality in the midst of joys and pleasures. Experience them to the max but be aware that you don't deserve this. God is good. Give him honor. Give him thanks. This actually increases our pleasure in the gift itself. Christian coffee isn't better but coffee tastes better to a Christian—not because of the bean or the brewer but because of the thankful theologian drinking it.

Full enjoyment of created things requires knowing the Creator

This is the begging question. Solomon is laying out two ways to live. One is the worldly man living for accumulation only to die and see it all go to someone else. The other is a life lived faithfully under God enjoying the daily blessings with gospel-shaped thanksgiving.

You can try to the latter but without a genuine relationship with God it won't last very long. You like created things but do you know the One who created them? The one true God. Do you know personally the good God who provides these for you?

And do you know his Son Jesus who came into this world and was rejected and despised and crucified? Why did he do that? His joy was to do the will of the Father. His joy was to obey including his heavenly Father's desire that he die for the sins of the world. That's what he did. To enjoy God you have to know God and the only way to know God is by faith in his Son Jesus.

"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) To know God is to enjoy God AND to enjoy with thanksgiving all his good gifts.

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