

MAN TO
MAN...
about God



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PREFACE

My friend Gordy is a professional musician. He's the drummer for a rock band and he spends a lot of time touring exotic places around the world. Gordy is very interested in Christianity but has lots of unanswered questions. Sometimes, when he's home, we train together at our local gym but, although we have great conversations, we rarely get the chance to get to grips with the heart of the Christian message. This is frustrating for both of us.

This book is for Gordy and other busy guys like him, who want to know what Jesus has to offer; to hear some hard evidence for faith in him, to hear sensible answers to the big questions about certainty, suffering and other religions, and to get past church traditions to the truth about Christ – in normal language.

It's a collection of great little talks for men from important parts of the Bible by experienced Bible teachers – speaking 'Man to Man... about God'.

This book is also for Christian men who want some ideas for explaining the Christian message clearly. It was published for the annual London Men's Convention which gathers men from churches all over south-east England into the prestigious surroundings of the Royal Albert Hall for encouragement to live for Christ. But the book is intended for men everywhere – sceptical, sympathetic and convinced alike – to help them know God.

Enjoy.

Richard Coekin
Chairman, the London Men's Convention



INTRODUCTION

It may seem strange that a book that aims to help men think more clearly about how God should be full of references to the Bible. What possible help could a 2000-year-old book be to modern men?

Many of us know some stories from the Bible, but, sadly, few of us have taken the trouble to seriously assess the Bible and its message as adults. We have vaguely heard that it is full of errors and untruths, and have moved on to other things.

The authors who contributed to this book have come to a different conclusion. Many of them started with similar suspicions about the relevance and reliability of the Bible, and yet, after careful study, now find themselves enthusiastic champions of its liberating message.

There's no space here to address these concerns in detail – there are many other excellent books that will help you sort out these questions. But as you read through this series of edited talks, we hope that you will begin to see that the Bible writers were wrestling with the same issues that so trouble 21st-century men. Despite the gap in culture, language and technology, they were still looking for answers to the questions we have: Where can I find meaning in life? How should I live? What makes a real man? What really matters in life?

It's worth remembering also that, despite rumours to the contrary, the Gospels – the accounts of Jesus' life in the Bible – are

now recognised by most modern scholars as historically reliable for three reasons:

- **They are authentic history.** These are reliable versions of the original documents because so many copies were distributed throughout the Roman empire that errors in copying can easily be excluded and the original version identified. We can be confident that what we read in the Bible is what was originally written by their authors.
- **They are attested history.** These Gospel accounts of Jesus, and of other public figures of the period, like Pontius Pilate, Herod Agrippa, Caiaphas the High Priest and John the Baptist, are all confirmed by non-Christian writers of that time. We can be confident that this is not some made up story, but fits the facts as we know them from other sources.
- **They are accurate history.** These Gospel accounts are compiled from the eye-witness testimonies of those who actually met and heard Jesus. Indeed, Luke explains in his introduction that he carefully researched and selected records that will provide a reliable historical account. So we can be confident that what we read about Jesus gives us a reliable picture of what he was like, what he said, and what he did.

Perhaps you've been lent this book by a Christian friend, but would consider yourself to be sceptic. Can we urge you not to dismiss the Bible before you start, but rather to read this with an open mind? Discover and think about its message first. Remember that many of its writers were men like you, who found it just as hard to believe. And above all, take time to think about the central figure in the Bible – Jesus Christ – and why it is that he captivates the hearts and lives of so many men down the ages, and today.

Tim Thornborough
Editor

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EMPTY PLEASURES

Hugh Palmer

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. "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" 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.

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. 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. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well – the delights of the heart of man. 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.

My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labour.

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 2:1-11

In an age when tests and exams have multiplied enormously, and when you can get A-levels or degrees in subjects that had never been heard of in my day, here is one they missed out. Our school curriculum is still too limited because schools and universities don't offer a Masters in 'Pleasure'. If they did, however, then the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, 'Mr Teacher' as he likes to call himself, would qualify for one.

Now the writer of Ecclesiastes might be 3,000 years old but he's so old that he's in fashion again. He invented the phrase, '*there's nothing new under the sun*'. He's made it his job to investigate life under the sun – life in here and now. In fact, this book is the blog of his experiences. He is trying to discover if there is any point to life but he doesn't leave us guessing very long. At the beginning of his second chapter he writes: '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.'

It's worth looking at his results in some detail, so let's examine this chapter and look at verses 2-10; the summary of his exhaustive pleasure research findings.

The research we'd all like to do

I did know someone once who managed to convince his university that he should spend three years researching the seashells of the Caribbean. Nice work if you can get it! Well, Mr Teacher goes one better. He is studying pleasure and he is more than happy to let his research take him wherever enjoyment might be found. He is committed to his pleasure research.

I don't know where you get your pleasure, but it's very likely that the Teacher has had a taste of it too. He begins with 'laughter' — the kind of laughter we'd call frivolity today: the fun of a game, a party, the office joker. Then he moves on to something he calls 'pleasure'. It's something just a little more upmarket than laughter; a touch more highbrow.

You know the type: the opera buff, the theatre-goer, the concert junkie. Next, he tries 'cheering myself with wine'. He joins in with the group that's always drowning their sorrows and drinking the evening away, either in the sophisticated wine bar or the local *Red Lion*. He calls it 'embracing folly' – the way in which some drown reality in a sea of joking and beer rather than face life as it is. They never think through their actions, just live for the next kick. It's the world of drugs or white-knuckle rides.

But whatever the Teacher puts himself through in the name of pleasure, he keeps his mind on his research, 'my mind still guiding me with wisdom'. All this is part of his analysis. He may have enjoyed the previous night's revelry, but when he gets up in the morning he still asks himself: '*Was it worth it?*'

Then there's the Teacher's creative side as well. Landscape gardening on a grand scale – 'I undertook great projects,' he says. 'I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks.' He's no half-hearted Bank Holiday gardener – he does it all.

By verse 7 he's acquired slaves; male and female. He has been on an intensive course of retail therapy. Born to shop. He's got many other slaves at home as well. And he's still amazingly wealthy.

I 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.

With this kind of wealth at his disposal, we're not likely to be able to outdo him as a playboy.

In verse 8 he tells us that, '*I acquired men and women singers.*' He knew the power and attraction of music and enjoyed it to the full. If you are one of those who spends all day plugged in to an ipod, Mr Teacher will nod and say: 'I understand!'

Mr Teacher's pursuit of pleasure doesn't stop here though. By the end of verse 8 we can see he's got himself '*a harem as well — the delights of the hearts of men.*' He's had the wine and the song, and he makes sure he gets the women too. All the women a man could possibly want. It's said that Solomon – the King of Israel

and the most likely writer of Ecclesiastes – had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which I think is more women than any man could possibly want! If sex is your thing, then Mr Teacher has been there, done that and got the T-shirt.

By verse 10 he tells us: *'I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.'* This was a very thorough piece of research. His diary is full of social engagements, his Blackberry crammed with numbers and emails for his clubs and contacts, and his credit-card holder is stretched to bursting. It's a no-expenses-spared experiment. Verse 10 is very striking: *'I refused my heart no pleasure.'* The Teacher carries no moral handcuffs. You name it? He's done it.

Remember the recent infamous Manchester United Christmas party? If the newspaper reports are to be believed, they hired a hotel exclusively for themselves. The players contributed £4000 each, invited 100 selected women from all over the place, but no wives, no girlfriends and all mobile phones taken away at the door. Mr Teacher understands that kind of a party.

He's thrilled to be doing this research. So let's pay very close attention as he comes to his conclusion. It's not me, the boring middle-aged rector having his say. It's not a tirade against sin and pleasure from someone who makes you wonder if he really knows what any of those things are actually like. No, this verdict is from a man we'd better listen to, because, when he finishes his pleasure research, he supplies us with his conclusions in verse 11.

The morning after the night before!

Verse 11 has got that kind of feel to it when we look at it; we come down to earth with a bump. After all that heady excitement, Mr Teacher's verdict leaves life very flat indeed.

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.

He gets up and looks into the mirror in the cold light of day. He has the guts to look life straight in the eye, examine his liver and

face the facts. He's not content just to put a brave face on it – that's what makes him truly wise. His big question, which he raised in his first chapter was: '*What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?*' and here he answers it. '*Nothing was gained under the sun.*' What's the profit? Meaningless.

'A chasing after the wind.' Ever tried doing that? Complete waste of time, isn't it? We can run as long and as fast as we like but we'll never catch it. Empty. The sense is never satisfied.

Oh yes, there are fleeting moments of triumph, but they are all too brief. Fifteen minutes of fame, but then what? The *Big Brother* celebrities who live out the rest of their lives as increasingly meaningless items in the tabloid newspapers.

The years go by all too quickly, the creative juices dry up, the body bulges where it shouldn't and the victories are harder to come by. The joy was in the toil: '*My heart took delight in all my work.*' The thrill was in the chase. He loved making the conquests, but once he had completed things... *meaningless*.

Actually, we don't really need Mr Teacher to tell us that. Others have discovered the truth from their own bitter experience. Jack Higgins, the author of *The Eagle has Landed* and many other novels, was once asked in an interview: 'Is there anything you wish someone had told you before you set out on all this success?' And he replied:

Yes. I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top there's nothing there.

It's chasing after the wind.

Pop stars' lives seem to shout it out at times. Everyone from Elvis to Britney Spears. Here's what Kurt Cobain of Nirvana wrote in his suicide note:

I haven't felt the excitement of listening to as well as creating music for too many years now. I can't stand the thought of Frances [his daughter] becoming the miserable, self-destructive death rocker that I've become.

Everything was meaningless.

Or go back to a big name from my youth, the great comedian Tony Hancock. In the sixties, over 15 million people – 30% of the adult population in the UK – used to tune in each week to *Hancock's Half Hour*. He reduced the nation to tears of laughter. He was a superb artist and comic but, in 1968, he committed suicide. Not long before his death, he included these lines in a monologue on a show talking of his death and what to put on his gravestone.

'E came, 'e went, in between, nothing. Won't even notice he's gone.
One day in the pub someone will say, "Where's old Hancock?
Haven't seen him recently." "Oh, Hancock? He's dead."

He had talked long with friends about the meaning and purpose of life but had refused to accept any answers. Spike Milligan, another great comedian, knew him well and said this:

'One by one he shut the door on all the people he knew, and then he shut the door on himself.'

So much for laughter.

Mr Teacher says: 'Chase all of this if you want, but we must face the post-mortem; the morning after the night before.' It's not guilty feelings he talks about here. He speaks of something even more profound; he says it doesn't work. We can play life hard and fast – as if there are no rules if we like – but we'll find there is on;; it doesn't deliver.

I don't know about you, but I can only take so much of this. There comes a time when I want to say to Mr Teacher: '*Ok, I won't argue with you anymore. Stop all the negatives, will you? Tell me what you **do** suggest!*' But Mr Teacher won't even let us get to his recommendations very quickly because he knows that, for some of us, our work is our pleasure... not for Mr Teacher though. He's all too conscious about where a life lived for work leads, or rather, where it doesn't lead. In chapter two, verse 17, he states:

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over

all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.

Where's all the work going?

John D Rockefeller, from that extremely wealthy American family, apparently had an income of about \$1 million a week towards the end of his life. But his doctors only allowed him to eat the barest minimum, so he lived on a diet that a pauper would have hated. One of his biographers described it like this:

Now less than 100 pounds in weight, he sampled everything at breakfast: a drop of coffee, a spoonful of cereal, a forkful of egg, and a bit of chop the size of a pea.

The richest man in the world but he couldn't even enjoy his food.

As for Mr Teacher, the thought of death is never far away either. Recently, I took my family to the British Museum to visit the remarkable exhibition of 'The First Emperor' and his astonishing terracotta army. It was packed but well worth the visit.

That first emperor was a remarkable man. From his home in the one state of Chin, within nine years he had conquered the rest of China, built 270 palaces and pulled the whole nation together. More than 30 years before he died, he was preparing his tomb because he saw himself not only as emperor of all of this world, but also the emperor of the whole of the afterlife. They buried him and, in 1974, someone stumbled upon the head from one of the terracotta soldiers. They found 7000 life-size model soldiers buried with him, guarding him. Extraordinary, isn't it?

However, within four years of his death, his dynasty had come to an end in China and was replaced. And these days, you can speak to anyone who has been to the exhibition and they'll tell you all about the soldiers, but I should think very few will be able to tell you what his name was. He's more famous for his model soldiers than himself.

That's the trouble with death, isn't it? '*Like the fool,*' our Teacher says in verse 16, '*the wise man too must die!*' Meaningless ... chasing after the wind.

You might be thinking to yourself: 'Look I've heard you. I get the message. It's a waste of time. I'm feeling down, but I've got the rest of my life ahead. What do you suggest Mr Teacher?' Well, he shares his conclusions with us in verses 24-26 and, for the first time, it seems as if there might be a ray of light in this gloomy picture.

Mr Teacher gets positive

Mr Teacher's first flash of hope is that he doesn't believe we live in a closed world. He doesn't actually believe that 'life under the sun' is all there is. It's why he won't even let me enjoy that threadbare philosophy of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.' But he's not a killjoy either. He doesn't say we have to join a monastery to be godly and find meaning. There are real pleasure possibilities in this life.

Look at verse 24:

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

To eat, to drink, to find satisfaction; these things are good. These pleasures can be enjoyed if we don't put a weight on them which is too much for them to bear. If we don't live for our work, our art, our food or our sport; if we don't make idols of them, they can bring us God-given contentment.

And, for a brief second, it's as if the Teacher has pulled back the curtain:

To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.

It's just a glimpse but he's in no rush to give us hasty answers. And Christians sometimes need to learn from him. Some of us can get to the stage where it seems we can't say anything without everything coming out. A friend once told me about a visit in Rwanda. He spoke of one young man who became a Christian and, a few days later, was at an open-air meeting. A friend of his spotted him

at the meeting, ran up to him and asked: *'What's it all about?'* The young Christian just turned to his friend and said: *'Oh how I wish you knew'* and left it there! A few weeks later the friend was so intrigued, he went and found out for himself and became a Christian too.

It reminded me of a comment I read in the paper recently.

I was standing in the queue at midnight, waiting with my daughter to buy a copy of the last Harry Potter book. It was cold and I was tired, and there was a man offering hot coffee at a stall near by. How enterprising, I thought. I went over to get a coffee. 'How much?' I asked. 'It's free,' the man replied. Looking down, I noticed a flyer for a Christian group on the stall. 'But you want some sort of donation, right?' 'No,' said the man, 'it's free.' 'Why would you give coffee away for free? What's in it for you?' I asked. The man just smiled. I took my free coffee. I've often thought about that smile, trying to figure it out.

I think Mr Teacher would have enjoyed that smile.

The greater teacher

Hundreds of years after Mr Teacher finished his book, an even greater teacher came. He came with the astonishing offer of a life that keeps on satisfying. We can read what he says in chapter four of John's Gospel. We find this teacher talking to a woman who's stumbled from one broken relationship to another. She's gone through five husbands and she's with yet another man. He says this to her:

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Malcolm Muggeridge was a very powerful, if somewhat intellectual, television personality. He became a Christian towards the end of his life and he said this:

I may, I suppose, regard myself or pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets – that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher

slopes of the Inland Revenue – that’s success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions – that’s pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time – that’s fulfilment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply those tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together and they’re nothing, less than nothing, measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty irrespective of who or what they are.

‘The water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life,’ said Jesus. In chapter 10 of John’s Gospel we can see this teacher, Jesus, saying something even more striking. He claims to bring life *without spin*. That’s a welcome relief for anyone who has glimpsed this sense of meaningless and is looking for real answers. Hear what he says in verse 10 of chapter 10:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Nicholas Bengli was a Zulu evangelist who said:

I’d been looking for joy and the devil gave me fun. I’d been looking for peace and the devil gave me error. I’d been looking for experience and the devil gave me excitement. Then I found Christ.

‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.’ You ask: ‘What’s that all about?’

How I wish you knew...