

The Bleakness of Life

Chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes

Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale
Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man.

King John by Will. Shakespeare, Act iii, Scene 4

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth by Will. Shakespeare, Act v, scene 5

Many people today share the same feelings as did Shakespeare's characters. They see life as meaningless, depressing, and futile, a great cosmic joke played by a cold, indifferent, impersonal world. For those who don't recognize God's place in the universe, this is an accurate viewpoint—life really is futile without God.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

A writer you should know about is Friedrich Nietzsche (pronounced "nee chee"), who was famous for penning the slogan "God is dead." He understood that if there is no God, then there can be no meaning and no basis for values. Values and truth are simply human opinions, one being no better or worse than any other. This is the basis for relativism, pluralism, and secularism. Nietzsche's brand of philosophy is called "nihilism," (pronounced "nile-ism") because it means "nothingness."¹ His books and philosophy are still popular and influential today.

How would your life be different if you believed that life really was meaningless and empty?

You'd probably do whatever you could to please and entertain yourself. You'd "go for the gusto" because this life is as good as it gets. You'd become a hedonist. That's exactly where many people are today—living to please themselves, pursuing pleasure.

Solomon, the Preacher, is setting out his argument about life "under the sun," that is, from an earthly perspective, without reference to God. His thesis statement is found in 1:2-3.

¹ RC Sproul, Lifeviews, p. 48-49.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

In verses 12-14, Solomon restates his case:

I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail [labor, struggle] hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

The rest of the book explains what he means as he discusses life with and without God.

In 1:4-18, Solomon complains about the meaninglessness of the life cycle.

- └ **What examples does Solomon give of cycles in life (.4-7)?** *Generations (.4), the sun (.5), the wind (.6), rivers (.7)*
- └ **What's his point in stating these examples?** *Although things change, they really stay the same. Things go on as they always have—people leave no lasting impact on the world. Even the most wise and noble of men don't really change things. Thus, life is vain—it doesn't matter what you do, things will go on as they always have. A rather dismal, depressing point of view.*
- └ **What seems to be his complaint in verses 9-11?** *The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: **and there is no new thing under the sun.** 10 Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. 11 **There is no remembrance of former things;** neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.*
***Man vanishes while nature endures.** Men can labor and scheme and work, but they don't really change things. So what's the use? Why strive? Man gets nothing for all his trouble. All man's labor can't produce anything new or lasting or memorable.*
- └ In verses 16, Solomon explains that he had great wealth and wisdom. What was the result of his examination of wisdom, madness, and folly (see vs. 18)? *He concluded that “in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” I.e., why strive after wisdom if it only comes to grief?*
- └ **Why is this a surprising conclusion?** *Because we are always exhorted to seek wisdom, that wisdom is good, that it comes from God, etc. So to find out that wisdom is the source of grief and sorrow is surprising.*

A Summary of Solomon's Complaints:

1. There is nothing new under the sun. All things go on the way they always have.
2. All labor and struggle in the world is useless. All efforts to change things are vain.
3. Even wisdom results in sorrow. It's not profitable to pursue wisdom.

Such statements make Ecclesiastes a very puzzling book. If such sentiments were true, the world would truly be a depressing place. Aren't they contrary to the overall teaching of the Bible? How are we to understand Solomon here? *Remember the overall context of these statements—they describe life "under the sun," that is, from a worldly point of view, without reference to God. Without God, Solomon's statements are true, which is truly a depressing thought.*

Exciting Wisdom from Ecclesiastes 1:

1. Life without God truly is meaningless and depressing. *Without God, there is no real meaning or purpose in life.*
2. God is the One who brings meaning to labor and trials. *God is with us in our problems. He uses them to teach us and to help us develop spiritually. There is a reason/purpose for every event because God is sovereignly controlling all things.*
3. Genuine wisdom is Godly wisdom. An intellect not submitted to God can only produce "sorrow and vexation of spirit."
4. The problems of this world cannot be explained or solved on a purely human level. Man does not have the answers to the questions. Only God can make sense of life.

Conclusion: The first chapter of Ecclesiastes does seem to reflect a depressing point of view. From the perspective of one "under the sun," life certainly is vain, empty, and unsatisfying. Fortunately, we are not alone in the universe. God gives meaning to life.

For Further Discussion:

1. **How does belief in God bring meaning and purpose to life?** *If God is sovereign, then He is directly involved in the world and in our lives. He is with us and cares for us. We are not alone. Events occur for a reason. The Word gives us truth and guides our thinking and behavior. What we do makes an eternal difference. Life is not just our years on earth.*
2. **How does lack of belief in God affect one's idea of a meaningful life?** *Ultimately, there can be no meaning to life if there is no God. Either one becomes his own god, makes substitute gods, or falls into depression or anarchy or nihilism or hedonism, etc.*
3. **Give some examples of times that God broke into the regular pattern of things.** *Joshua's long day, opening of the Red Sea and Jordan River, rain and drought, calmed wind and waves, people raised from the dead, people died supernaturally, iron floated, etc.*
4. **Is God active only in the miraculous?** *No, He's always actively involved in the universe and in our lives. It's often difficult to distinguish God's activity in our lives from things that "normally" happen. But if God is sovereign, then He is active.*
5. **What evidence is there in our society of its rejection of God, and thus, of meaning?** *It's all over the place—modern art, literature, music (John Cage), TV. Some call our culture "post-modern." From the mid 1800's thru the 1960's, people had great confidence in science and the human mind. Prior to that time, people for the most part (in the West) believed in God and His Word. Now we are in an era when people don't believe in anything—not God, not reason, not science—nothing. People have rejected the whole idea of truth. All is at sea, everything is up for grabs, there can be no truth or error, right or wrong, fact or fiction. No one can tell anyone they are wrong because the truth is as you see it. No one can tell anyone else what to do or how to live because there is no ultimate standard. Such an underlying philosophy explains why our culture behaves in the way it does.*