

## Ecclesiastes 1- • Chapter Study

### INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ecclesiastes derives its **title** from the word “Preacher” in 1:1.

The Hebrew **Qoheleth** means one who convenes or gathers an assembly.

When the Bible was translated into Greek, the translators used the Greek word ‘Ecclesiastes’ for the Hebrew Qoheleth.

The **author** is Solomon, David's son, the 3<sup>rd</sup> king of Israel; the ruler who raised Israel to its Golden Age.

The **setting** of the book is this: A **scholar** of vast experience, an **expert** if you will, gives his greatest speech. This is his **"last lecture."**

He's spent his life culling wisdom from every source he could.

He's been uniquely positioned to do so because as the ruler of a powerful & wealthy kingdom he possessed the ability to.

As you'll remember from his story, Solomon had been **supernaturally endowed** with more wisdom than anyone before or since.

That wisdom taught him that as bright as he was, he was far from perfect & knew everything,

So he went on an all-consuming pursuit of **more** knowledge, **more** wisdom.

In the Proverbs, Solomon repeatedly marks how true wisdom seeks to grow.

But as we'll see, in Solomon's campaign to grow wiser, he ended up pursuing some unwise avenues.

Ecclesiastes is a **chronicle**, his **review** of what he learned.

The key word in the Ecclesiastes is **"vanity"**, emptiness.

After his long crusade to get wise & discover the meaning of life, he realized **he'd always known it**.

His father had taught it to him as a child & young man.

God had made it clear to him at the beginning.

But he'd wandered from it, thinking his quest would be complete when he learned some **secret**, had some special **experience**, or obtained some unique **possession**.

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's quest to find satisfaction, happiness, contentment.

He longed to be able to say, “That's it! That's enough.”

Enough knowledge, pleasure, wealth, power, whatever.

But what he discovered was There's never enough!

Because **this life** isn't the end.

It's just the journey to our destination, which is Heaven.

And **the only real satisfaction** we'll have in this life are the moments, experiences, knowledge that connects us to God.

So Ecclesiastes is Solomon's story of discovery.

As I said, the key word is "vanity" = emptiness.

Solomon gives us a kind of **checklist** of all the things he delved into to find meaning, then crosses them off by saying it was another pointless waste of time & energy.

Though this describes the bulk of the book, there are pearls of wisdom here as well.

There were valuable lessons he picked up along the way & those are scattered throughout his message.

Before we dive in, want to add this . . .

Historians tend to locate the beginning of philosophy with the Greeks around the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

The claim is that it was Xenophanes, Pythagoras & Heraclitus who got the ball rolling, then Socrates picked it up & ran with it.

Solomon lived nearly 400 years before them and while he lays down some heavy philosophy, he admits that much of what he shared was stuff he'd collected from others.

In other words, it was already in play.

As we noted when studying Job, **that** was the first written book, & dates back to the time of Abraham.

Job is a powerful philosophical treatise on the problem of evil & suffering.

So the Greeks weren't first on the scene with deep philosophy.

There was a comprehensive body of profound wisdom literature in the ancient Middle East.

Ecclesiastes 1

<sup>1</sup> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

There's nothing that explicitly says Solomon was the author, but both ancient tradition & the internal evidence of the book make it clear he was the author.

So, what does the wisest man who's ever lived have to say?

<sup>2</sup> "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity."

Since we're going to see this word often in Ecclesiastes, we need to define it.

What does Solomon mean?

Vanity is the Hebrew word **hebel**.

It means **vapor, wisp**.

It's almost always used **idiomatically** & means **inconsequential, transient**.

It's a word that carries a strong connotation of dismissal.

To say that something is vain means it's **distained** because it's a cheat.

It's all image but no substance.

It's just a veneer, a façade with nothing behind it.

When Solomon says it's all vanity, he's looking at the world as those sets they have at Universal studios.

They're just fronts. They look good, look real, until you pass thru a door and realize it's just a fake front.

The world makes great promise, but doesn't deliver.

It can't, it's got no depth, no substance.

Now That's a depressing place to begin. But it serves Solomon's point to do so, as we'll see.

He goes on ...

<sup>3</sup> What profit has a man from all his labor In which he toils under the sun?

<sup>4</sup> *One* generation passes away, and *another* generation comes; But the earth abides forever.

<sup>5</sup> The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose.

<sup>6</sup> The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit.

<sup>7</sup> All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea *is* not full; To the place from which the rivers come, There they return again.

The key to unlocking Solomon's negative review is at the end of v. 3 where he speaks of things "Under the sun."

That phrase is going to be repeated **over 30 times** in Ecclesiastes.

You see, Solomon's assignment of vanity is to the **everything** that finds its purpose & meaning under the sun, on earth, in reference to physical, biological life here & now with no reference to eternity or the realm of the Spirit.

Life under the sun is the human society devoid of God.

It's the world that works 9-5, eats, sleeps, sells, buys, entertains, laughs, cries, & dies without consideration of anything beyond itself.

Solomon looks at that system here in vs. 3-7 and says it just goes on day after day, year after year, century after century, & nothing really changes.

Clothing & hair styles change. New gadgets & toys are added.

But as far as men & women finding satisfaction, meaning, purpose – nothing's changed.

Different singers – same song.

There is one little interesting insight here in v. 7 . . .

It's thought ancient man didn't understand the hydrological cycle of evaporation from the seas, to the

clouds, rain, rivers and back to the sea.

Yet Solomon mentions it here in the most casual manner as though it was common knowledge.

Because it was.

As archaeology continues to unearth ancient civilizations, they're discovering how advanced the knowledge of ancient man was.

Solomon goes on now, further describing the emptiness of life under the sun.

<sup>8</sup> All things *are* full of labor; Man cannot express *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing.

Everything under the sun requires constant work or it falls apart.

You're never really done; there's always more to do.

There's a saying in the restaurant business; If you're caught up, you're out of business.

The unsated eye & ear well sum up the spirit of our age.

Technology advances so quickly most things are 'state of the art' for a couple weeks.

Yet millions try to find satisfaction living purely under the sun by acquiring the latest gadget.

How long will that new cell phone you stood in line for a day to be one of the first to have be the latest & greatest? A month maybe.

Contentment never comes to those caught up in a system that **operates on** stimulating greed & envy so as to sell new products.

There is satisfaction though for those whose vision extends beyond the temporal realm of life under the sun & sees into the spiritual realm of the Son of God.

<sup>9</sup> That which has been *is* what will be, That which *is* done is what will be done, And *there is* nothing new under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this *is* new"? It has already been in ancient times before us.

This is where we get the well-worn idiom – "There's nothing new under the sun."

Does technology & invention create something truly new? Not really.

It only allows us to do the same things **differently**, more **quickly**.

At its best it alleviates suffering & prolongs life a few years, so that that person can die at an older age, in more pain!

At worst technology enables humans to inflict greater suffering upon greater numbers with less effort!

<sup>11</sup> *There is* no remembrance of former *things*, Nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come by those who will come after.

Those of a mind to argue with Scripture might say, "Not so! I'm a student of history. I remember what's happened."

Good for you. What were the name of the 4 Generals who divvied up the Greek Empire after Alexander's death?

Who was Secretary of State under President Zachary Taylor?

Let's get more personal; What were the names of your great-grands? That's your own family!

Most people don't know their names.

Solomon's point is that we have an innate **longing for significance**.

Our desire & drive for **satisfaction** isn't just about pleasure.

We want to be successful in whatever it is life is about.

We sense there's a goal to obtain & it's more than having fun.

We want our lives to count.

What will **prove we counted** is that others will remember us after we're gone.

We'll count because they will number us among the greats.

The sad fact is, apart from a few **specialists** called **historians** whose **specialty is to remember**, no one remembers those who've come & gone.

<sup>12</sup> I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised.

God has given to human beings the capacity to learn & grow. // What does their learning teach them?

<sup>14</sup> I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

<sup>15</sup> *What is* crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be numbered.

Speaking from a purely “under the sun” perspective, one locked into **only** the wisdom & resources this world can provide, there’s no solution to what ails humanity.

<sup>16</sup> I communed with my heart, saying, “Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.” <sup>17</sup> And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. <sup>18</sup> For in much wisdom *is* much grief, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Solomon’s pursuit of philosophy & the best worldly wisdom could produce was only an enlarged sense of how wrong things were, not how to rectify them.

So in v. 17 he says he chucked philosophy & wisdom & decided to go the other direction.

He was living the high life; rich, powerful, with the very best life under the sun had to offer & he was miserable.

He looked over & saw the lower classes & they seemed to be getting by just fine so he decided to hang out with them for a while.

If he’d have been living in Beverly Hills before, he moved to a trailer park in Pacoima.

He traded in his Armani suits for Sporting team T-shirts & Jerseys.

He traded in his limo for an F-150. And he moved all his furniture out to the yard.

Don’t know why but that’s what all the neighbors did so he did it too to fit in.

Here’s what he discovered after hanging out in the trailer park for a while – those people are no happier & no less messed up than the folk in Beverly Hills.

As he’ll later disclose, the problem with life under the sun is just that; it limits itself to what’s under the sun, to this world, fallen as it is.

The solution to what’s wrong lies beyond the boundaries of this world. They lie with God alone.

Life IN this world makes no sense until you look **beyond** this world.

Ch. 1 is depressing because Solomon moves to strike a chord with those who are honest seekers.

They’ve come to the same conclusions he had and knew the same frustrations.

He simply articulates the thinking of those who’ve lived under the sun and realized the answers aren’t found there.

Only then can he bring them hope.

Ecclesiastes 2

Solomon now shares some of the various things he delved into to find meaning.

1 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup> I said of laughter—“Madness!”; and of mirth, “What does it accomplish?”

There was a period in his life when Sol decided to really go for it in terms of scratching his soul’s itch to find satisfaction.

He went about it in a very controlled manner.

First he tried **pleasure** by surrounding himself with that which would only enhance happiness.

He doesn’t spell out exactly what he did but he says he sought it in mirth & laughter.

So maybe he employed some comedians, court jesters, professional pranksters.

His goal was to maintain a sense of good-feelings and happiness.  
It didn't work.  
So next he decided to see if he could cop a buzz by drinking & find someplace in inebriation that erased any hint of frustration.

<sup>3</sup> I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.

He tried to just get a buzz on, while still holding on to reason.

When that didn't bring the relief he was looking for, he went ahead and drank it all, trying to get completely gone.

That also proved to be a no go.

<sup>4</sup> I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove.

Monuments! That's got to be the ticket. Produce massive buildings & public works that will last long after you're gone.

Make something so grand that when others pass by they'll remember you.

Nope! That proved to be empty as well.

<sup>7</sup> I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup> I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds.

<sup>9</sup> So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

Solomon had an advantage over others only a tiny few have known –he was a king & so had access to wealth & power like no other.

He used it to fit himself out with the accoutrements of royalty. And he really went for it.

He made it his aim to fluff up his majesty- and fluff he did.

And once it was all complete, he was no closer to the satisfaction he longed for.

Throughout all of this, the supernatural wisdom God had given him to rule remained.

He was still making brilliant decisions when it came to governing the kingdom.

But when it came to governing his own life, he was a wreck.

<sup>10</sup> Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, For my heart rejoiced in all my labor; And this was my reward from all my labor. <sup>11</sup> Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done And on the labor in which I had toiled; And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.

When Solomon says that whatever he desired he took & did, isn't just hyperbole / exaggeration.

This guy had 700 wives & 300 concubines.

Many if not most of the wives were married for political reasons, but that doesn't change the fact that they were wives with whom he did what husbands & wives do.

Why a guy who has 700 wives to take care of needs 300 girlfriends is a mystery.

Unless – well, that's right >> The oriental harem was a sign of majesty.

Solomon had a thousand women because it was part of his campaign to fluff his royal glory.

But here's the deal: Part of the point of having a harem was to demonstrate what a man the king was.

Solomon is making a point, a claim!

I'm richer than you,  
smarter than you,  
wiser than you,  
more powerful than you,  
more glorious than you,  
classier than you, trashier than you,  
I've been drunker than you,  
had **way** more sex than you,  
known pleasures you can't even imagine,  
laughed more, cried more, been more bored & more excited.

I've seen, done, learned, known, & forgotten more than you can even imagine in your wildest dreams –  
Now let me tell you what I've learned – It's all empty >> a grasping after the wind. // **None of it satisfies.**

<sup>12</sup> Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly; For what can the man do who succeeds the king?— Only what he has already done. <sup>13</sup> Then I saw that wisdom excels folly As light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise man's eyes are in his head, But the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived That the same event happens to them all. <sup>15</sup> So I said in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, It also happens to me, And why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity."

<sup>16</sup> For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!

While Sol tried both wisdom & folly to see which worked better, he found that wisdom really was the better of the 2.

But wisdom was no guarantee against catastrophe.  
It doesn't matter how wise you are, it won't shield you from disaster.

There are some trials, some challenges everyone will face.

The death of a loved one, one's own end.  
Unforseen perils that can strike anyone.

These are all things that are common to the human race & it doesn't matter how smart you are, you can be hammered by them.

So, if the only life there is, is the one lived under the sun, whether you're wise or foolish doesn't really matter.

Graveyards aren't divided up into 2 sides; fools here, wise there. They lie side by side.

So what's wisdom really accomplished for the wise?

This line of thought brought some serious depression to Sol . . .

<sup>17</sup> Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind. <sup>18</sup> Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. <sup>20</sup> Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.

You live, you work hard, you accomplish something significant.

Then you die and what you've done is taken over by others who don't appreciate it because they didn't toil over it as the labor of love it was to you.

They get to benefit from your work, but without the respect of what it took to produce it.  
And they end up squandering it.  
Solomon's really bugged by the injustice of it all.

<sup>24</sup> Nothing is better for a man [under the sun] than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.

Even though life under the sun is fraught with distress, toil, & futility – it's only those who stop to realize that who're bummed by it.

The average person who avoids such philosophical issues can live a moderately happy existence.

In His grace, God has provided to human beings the capacity to experience pleasure & know real joy.

These are meant to be hints of something greater.

Frustration is meant to be a hint something is wrong.

But putting those 2 realities together, the Spirit works on men & women to find the answer in a life

**BEYOND** the sun.

[A can of Fruit Cocktail]

<sup>25</sup> For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? <sup>26</sup> For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

This parallels what he'd said in vs. 13-14, that wisdom is better than folly.

So here, righteousness is better than being wicked because there is a moral order to the universe and what we sow, we reap. That's a principle that applies under the sun.

But again, if you access life by a purely under the sun perspective, then everything is ultimately the same because the grave claims all.

Solomon says, "No one gets out of this thing alive!"