

The Futility of Life Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 - *“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² ‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. ³ What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?’”*

Background Notes

Who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, and when was it written? King Solomon wrote this book of Scripture near the end of his life, after he had come back to worshipping the Lord. This traditional view on the date and author of Ecclesiastes is supported by both Jewish and Christian tradition.

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (v1). In our English Bibles, the title of this book follows the title used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). “Ecclesiastes” comes from the word “preacher” or “teacher” or one who speaks to assemblies of people. You probably recognize how close this word is to the word “ecclesia” - the Greek word for “assembly” or “church.”

The fact that the “Preacher” was the son of David and king of Jerusalem pretty well narrows the authorship down to Solomon. Look also at verse 12: *“I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.”* And verse 16: *“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.’”* Who else could the author be, other than King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived?

Some commentators have proposed that the authorship claim is a literary device that was used to give the book more clout, but there is nothing in this book that Solomon could not have written near the end of his life in the 10th century BC.

Verse 2 is one of the best-known verses in the book of Ecclesiastes: *“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”* Verse 3 holds the key to properly understanding what verse 2 means, in its context - as well as the key to understanding the rest of the book. The key is the phrase *“under the sun.”* Verse 3: *“What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?”*

“Under the sun” is a figure of speech that is used twenty-nine times in the book of Ecclesiastes. It means looking at things from the *human perspective*, without taking God (who is “above the sun”) into account. From the human perspective,

apart from divine revelation, all is vanity. Life is futile! Without the divine perspective from “above the sun,” ultimately life is meaningless. Nothing makes sense. Life is a big zero.

I can't think of anything emptier than getting old and nearing death, if I thought that this life is all there is. How do unbelievers cope with this? For them to say that they've lived a good life and followed the Golden Rule is such shallow thinking. Without God in the picture, there is no such thing as the Golden Rule! Without God, who determines what is good and what is bad for mankind - this random collection of living molecules that came out of nothing and are destined for nothing?

By the inspiration of the Spirit of God, Solomon had it right. Under the sun, without divine revelation, there is no meaning to life. All is “vanity” – futile and meaningless!

However, it's extremely important to notice that Solomon did **not** say that life is futile and meaningless! He said that without God in the picture, when we look at life only from the “under the sun” perspective, life is indeed meaningless. But when God is in the picture, life is **not** a big zero. With divine revelation, we come to see that life is worth living! It can be enjoyed and it can be very meaningful. In fact when we move our perspective “above the sun” and view life from God's perspective, we see that Ecclesiastes is a guidebook for living life joyously as a believer.

Doctrinal Points

1. “Under the sun,” the cycles of life lead to futility.

Verses 4-11: *“One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. ⁵ The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. ⁶ The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. ⁷ 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. ⁸ All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Is there anything of which it may be said, “See, this is new”? It has already been in ancient times before us. ¹¹ 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.”*

In these verses, Solomon gave examples to prove his point. Under the sun, from the human perspective alone, without the benefit of having the divine perspective, all is vanity and futile and meaningless. Generations come and generations go, and life goes on (v4). When you look at nature, everything is endless cycles, day after day – winds and rains come and go, rivers flow, the sun rises and sets, you name it (v5-7). If Solomon were living today, he might say “global warming and global cooling” – it comes and goes in endless cycles.

In the statement that there is nothing new under the sun (v9), Solomon didn't mean that there are no new inventions or no technological advances. And when he said that there is no remembrance of earlier things (v11), his point was not that we don't learn lessons from history. His point was that there are no basic changes in life. Everything generation struggles with the same problems. There is no real progress.

But you say, "What about the gospel? What about faithful service for the Lord? It is not cyclic and it's not meaningless!" That's right - and that's the point. Above the sun - from God's perspective and from divine revelation - we know the whole story and the big picture. But apart from divine revelation, the cycles of life lead only to futility.

2. "Under the sun," human wisdom and knowledge lead to futility.

Verses 12-18: *"I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ 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 afflicted. ¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.

¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. ¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."

Did you ever try to catch the wind? Striving to catch the wind or grasping after wind (v14-17) is a great illustration of a futile activity. In these verses, Solomon acknowledged that in spite of all his human wisdom and knowledge, he could not figure out the real meaning of life. And remember, Solomon was the wisest person who ever lived! Apart from divine revelation, it appears that God purposely hides the truth about the meaning of life, so living is just a lifelong struggle.

Verse 13: *"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 afflicted."*

Solomon searched for meaning in life from the extreme of intellectualism on the one hand, to the extreme of madness and folly on the other (v17) - and he struck out! In fact, he found that the more you know, the more worries you have.

And the more you know, the more pain you experience, because you can see it coming and you know how bad life can get. Verse 18: *For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."* In other words,

“what you don’t know won’t hurt you” and “ignorance is bliss.” These phrases are not Bible verses, but they do capture what the Bible is saying here.

“Under the sun” - apart from divine revelation - human wisdom and knowledge lead to futility.

Practical Application

Set your mind on things “above the sun.”

This title is really a paraphrase of Colossians 3:2, “*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.*” In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are looking at life from the “under the sun” perspective - and that’s the only viewpoint unbelievers have. No wonder they set their minds on the things that are on the earth.

Unfortunately, that’s what a lot of believers do as well. In Colossians 3, believers are commanded to live their lives in line with their spiritual position. Colossians 3:1-2, “*If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, for Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.*”

The idea in these verses is not that we should be “so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good”! No! The thought is that we should live our lives with the knowledge and viewpoint that we’ve been saved **out** of this world. We are now **citizens of Heaven**.

The words of this old song give us the right perspective: “This world is not my home – I’m just a-passin’ through.” Our mission now is to serve the Lord all the days that He gives us on this earth. So set your mind on things “above the sun.”