

# Ecclesiastes: The Philipians of the Old Testament

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## Chapter 1: A Disappointing Discovery

### From **Experience**, the Preacher **Learns That Man Is Powerless (1:1–2:26)**

Discouragement, despair, and disappointment. “when Solomon was old, . . . his wives turned his heart away after other gods” (1 Kgs 11:4). Intriguingly, the Old Testament writers refer to idols (“other gods”) as “vanities” (or, “empty things,” “nothings”; Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26). The Preacher employs the same Hebrew word for “vanities” in the book of Ecclesiastes. As an old man, the wisest, most accomplished and wealthy king of Israel discovers that life no longer possesses meaning. All satisfaction vanishes (Eccl 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:7; 12:1). Solomon, Israel’s most powerful king, feels powerless—unable to control his life, unable to control what happens to his work and wealth after his death (2:18–19), unable to prevent his death (9:12).

Surrounded by more success, opulence, and pleasure than any person could ever desire, Solomon hits rock bottom in his miserable existence. Then he begins a spiritual odyssey to return from the quagmire of nothingness in which he flounders—a search for meaning in life. It begins with admitting his empty condition. Solomon concedes that his view of life is bleak and dismal.

Could it be that Solomon never truly believed? Could his spiritual odyssey recorded in Ecclesiastes describe his journey to faith in the Lord God of heaven and earth?

- 1 Kings 3:3–9. Only after Solomon’s receives understanding does the building of the Temple proceed.
- 1 Kings 8:1–66. Dedication of the Temple. See verses 24–26, 56, 58, 61.
- 1 Kings 9:1–9. God appears to Solomon a second time.
- Author of Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Psalms 72 and 127, and Ecclesiastes.
- Compare 2 Peter 1:20–21.
- 1 Kings 11:1–6. Solomon’s heart turned away from God in his old age. See Nehemiah 13:26.

### Vanishing Vapors (1:2)

Meaning	Reference (NAU)
<i>vain</i>	2 Kings 17:15
<i>foolishly</i>	Job 27:12
<i>emptily</i>	Job 35:16
<i>nothing</i>	Psalms 39:6

<i>futility</i>	Psalm 78:33
<i>a mere breath</i>	Psalm 94:11
<i>vapor</i>	Proverbs 21:6
<i>enigma</i>	Ecclesiastes 8:10 (NET)
<i>fleeting</i>	Ecclesiastes 9:9; 11:10
<i>idols</i>	Jeremiah 10:8
<i>worthless</i>	Jeremiah 10:15
<i>useless</i>	Lamentations 4:17

“All is vanity” =            הכל    everything  
    ↓            ↓  
    הבל    nothing

We cannot, at any time, make the mistake of thinking, “This decision or choice is insignificant—it’s not going to affect anything.” In one moment of selfishness or recklessness, or just plain inadvertence, our *everything* can become *nothing*.

### Round and Round, and Round and Round . . . (1:3–8)

Sometimes readers interpret this passage as descriptive of the utter futility of life due to its endless succession of empty repetitions. On the other hand, we can understand as speaking about “the *limits* within which nature—including human nature—must run its course.”<sup>1</sup> In His omniscience the Creator established the earth’s cycles at creation (Gen 1:14–18) and reiterated the natural ordinances after the Noachic flood (8:22). Divinely-ordained cycles in creation elicit awe and admiration as well as providing an individual with an accurate assessment of his or her insignificance (cp. Ps 8:4). Our insignificance elevates the majesty and authority of the Creator, causing reverential awe (cf. Eccl 3:14).

Mankind’s existence is ephemeral against the backdrop of the permanence of the world in which we live.

The transitory state of man is strikingly contrasted with the permanently abiding condition of the earth. Now why should this be? Wasn’t man made a little lower than the angels? Yet he, not the earth, appears to be in a state of passing away.<sup>2</sup>

References to man’s labor bracket descriptions of the never-ending cycles of the created order (1:3, 8). Solomon experiences frustration at the shortness of time on earth to enjoy the fruit of one’s labors, to taste all the potential gusto that life on earth has to offer. The brevity of life leaves little time to enjoy life to its full. King Death is coming too soon for old King Solomon.

Mere existence requires exertion and Solomon is often exhausted by it. It has been so since the Fall of Adam. Man’s days are spent in labor in order to be able to eat and, in the end, his body returns to the dust from whence it was originally taken (Gen 3:19; cf. Eccl 12:7).

In the final fleeting days of his life Solomon longs for the knowledge that all his accomplishments are worthwhile (v. 3). He searches for a sense of satisfaction that is deeper and more lasting than just what his senses are capable of perceiving (v. 8).

<sup>1</sup> R. N. Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 and the Wonders of Nature,” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 239.

<sup>2</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 49–50.

“Under the sun” (v. 3) occurs only in Ecclesiastes.<sup>3</sup> Phoenician, Akkadian, Elamite, and Greek writers also utilize the same phrase.<sup>4</sup> “In this life” or “on earth” provide two less colorful and more prosaic ways to make the same statement. Wise King Solomon uses phrases that convey concepts designed to goad the recipient into action (12:11). The poetry of divinely-revealed wisdom lifts the hearer above and beyond this earthly realm—beyond the sun itself—into the heavenly presence of the Creator.

The Preacher does not exclude God from his picture of the cosmos. God is involved in the lives of human beings in this life (1:13; 2:24–26; 3:10–13). God is continuously at work in His creation (3:11, 14). Why is there no mention of the Creator in 1:4–7? God’s noticeable absence in this section might also help to create increasing dramatic tension, making the audience think, stimulating their internal response.

Christ precedes His parable of the greedy rich man by declaring that “not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). The same message comes through loud and clear in Ecclesiastes.

- No real profit ensues from material wealth (1:3; 2:10–11).
- Abundance does not satisfy (1:8; 5:10).
- Just as God denied the rich man his anticipated enjoyment of his wealth in the parable, so also the Preacher says that God does not empower the rich person to eat of his abundance (6:2).

Note that there are key differences between the parable and Ecclesiastes:

- Selfishly, the foolish rich man focused on what he considered “*my crops . . . my barns . . . my goods*” (Luke 12:17–18). Ecclesiastes, however, views the fruits of one’s labor as gifts from God (5:19).
- Ecclesiastes teaches people to keep busy with God-given joy (Eccl 5:20), rather than taking their ease and doing nothing. Qohelet exhorts people to pour themselves into whatever their “hand finds to do” (9:10).

“All things are wearisome” (Eccl 1:8) most likely refers to the ceaseless activity of the natural phenomena described in verses 5–7. “Man is not able to tell *it*” indicates that mankind falls silent before the repetitive wonders of creation. Instead of “joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8), human beings experience an inexpressible frustration. That which is seen in creation cannot bring the satisfaction and joy that the unseen Son of God can bestow. Unregenerate men see clearly the evidence of creation (Rom 1:20), but become “futile in their speculations” (v. 21). “Professing to be wise, they became fools” (v. 22) because they “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25). That is why they have no words to express the meaning of the sun, the wind, and the rivers.

### **Nothing New (1:9–11)**

The past is the future; the future is the past (v. 9). Earthly existence is not an unending series of discoveries—going where no man has ever gone before. Yes, there are things such as nuclear power and manned landings on the moon that never happened in prior history, but the vast majority of events are merely repetitions in a slightly different costume. There is a constant yearning for new things and new experiences, and yet, what

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<sup>3</sup> Eccl 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 8:9, 15 (2x), 17; 9:3, 6, 9 (2x), 11, 13; 10:5.

<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 58.

is new for one person is old hat to someone else. God alone has the power to “make all things new” (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Num 16:30). Michael Eaton observes that that which is truly new must come from the realm above the sun, heaven itself:

. . . The Preacher’s point is that this cannot be viewed secularly. Consider life ‘under the sun’ and the concept of God’s ruling from heaven no longer holds good. No-one can appeal to God to ‘look down’ and intervene (Is. 63:15). There can be no redemption, for no new factor can be introduced. The heavenly realm is the source of what is really new, the psalmist’s ‘new song’ (Ps. 96:1) and the prophet’s ‘new thing’ (Is. 43:19).<sup>5</sup>

By means of a rhetorical question, the Preacher confronts his audience: “Is there anything of which one might say, ‘See this, it is new’?” (Eccl 1:10). Before they can try to weasel out of the dilemma, he blurts out the truth: “Already it has existed for ages which were before us.”

It seems that mankind labors under a continual case of cultural and historical amnesia (v. 11). Solomon’s reign had begun with promise, but near the end of his forty years on the throne of David, his legacy fails to impress. His spiritual life declines and the nation of Israel declines. Very shortly after his death civil war ensues and the kingdom divides with ten of the twelve tribes seceding. Solomon pursues the wind of *nothings* (idols) and the nation reaps the whirlwind.

Advance in the future builds on recovering the past. See Deuteronomy 5:15 and 32:7–9.

### **In Pursuit of Wisdom (1:12–18)**

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:23 announces the Preacher’s personal testimony, his confession to his inability to resolve life’s most important issues without God. He has determined to examine a great range of human activities in a search for anything of lasting value. In case his readers should purpose to take up the same search, “he warns us of the outcome (1:13b–15) before he takes us through his journey (1:16–2:11); finally he will share with us the conclusions he has reached (2:12–26).”<sup>6</sup> Ancient Near Eastern royal autobiographical texts like the following display hyperbole (exaggeration) and a patent rewriting of history:

Amen-hotep-the-God-Ruler-of-Heliopolis . . . He is a king very weighty of arm: there is none who can draw his bow in his army, among the rulers of foreign countries, or the princes of Retenu, because his strength is so much greater than (that of) any (other) king who has existed. Raging like a panther when he treads the field of battle; there is none who can fight in his vicinity. . . . Prevailing instantly over every foreign country, whether people or horses, (though) they have come in millions of men, . . .<sup>7</sup>

Tiglath-pileser, the legitimate king, king of the world, king of Assyria, king of (all) the four rims (of the earth), the courageous hero who lives (guided) by the trust-inspiring oracles given (to him) by Ashur and Ninurta, the great gods and his lords, (and who thus) overthrew (all) his

<sup>5</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, “The Search for Satisfaction: Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26,” in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 250.

<sup>7</sup> John A. Wilson, trans., “The Asiatic Campaigning of Amen-hotep II,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. by James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 247. Amen-hotep II reigned in Egypt 1447–1421 B.C.

enemies; son of Ashurreshishi, king of the world, king of Assyria, (grand)son of Mutakkil-Nusku, also king of the world, king of Assyria.<sup>8</sup>

Solomon's journal avoids hyperbole, however. Other biblical texts adequately document His accomplishments. Unlike his royal peers, Solomon admits to failure, frustration, and folly. The detailed listing of the king's accomplishments plays an important role in *Ecclesiastes*. Without this background, the reader might wonder if the Preacher's credentials are valid—or, at least, appropriate to the huge task of research being conducted. After all, Solomon claimed to “seek and explore by wisdom . . . all that has been done under heaven” (v. 13). At his command emissaries went to India, to Egypt, to Ethiopia, to Babylon, to Greece, and to the uttermost parts of the world in search of answers to life's most perplexing questions. Solomon has ships and men to command. His wealth funds wide-ranging expeditions. His knowledge of the fauna and flora excels (1 Kgs 4:33). His wisdom, though tainted by his disobedience, is still vast and capable of collating the results and reaching a conclusion.

As his search for answers continues, Solomon begins to see that the only One Who can answer life's questions is the Creator Himself. Absence of viable human solutions drive the king inexorably back to God, Who first appears in *Ecclesiastes* at 1:13. Daily Solomon's awareness of his God grows and, with it, his wisdom is renewed.

However, the task proves “grievous” (v. 13). Some go so far as to translate the word as “evil . . . because no solution is found after much hard work.”<sup>9</sup> The word for “task” occurs only in the Book of *Ecclesiastes* (1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:3, 14; 8:16). The term basically means busy-ness that is humbling. God Himself appoints humans to this task. From the perspective of one “under the sun,” such a task is difficult and, seemingly, unrewarding. However, 3:10–11 sets the task in its proper perspective: the perspective of eternity. Deep within each human being God implants the urge to seek truth. As sinful human beings, however, the desired result is fraught with frustration and failure. Without God the quest for truth and for eternity is fruitless.

“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun” (v. 14). Solomon's exhaustive search for answers meets with failure. All his wisdom and resources cannot turn up the answer to his most basic question: What is the purpose of life on this planet? He attempts to make order of chaos. In our own times another very knowledgeable man has undertaken a similar task with a strange twist to it. World-renowned physicist, Stephen Hawking, investigates the origin of the universe while seeking to disprove the existence of God.<sup>10</sup> So far, like Solomon of old, he has failed. Could it be that people like Solomon and Hawking are looking but not seeing? They take into account the visible, but what about the invisible?

Charles Swindoll recounts an interesting story. A native American was visiting New York City. Walking with a friend near the center of Manhattan, the Indian suddenly stopped his companion and whispered, “Wait, I hear a cricket.” His friend was disbelieving. A cricket? In downtown New York? Impossible. The cacophony of sounds from passing taxis, impatient honking, people shouting, brakes

<sup>8</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, trans., “Texts from Hammurabi to the Downfall of the Assyrian Empire,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 274–75. Tiglath-pileser I was king of Assyria 1114–1076 B.C.

<sup>9</sup> Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 78. Longman's erroneously assumes that the Preacher subtly criticizes God throughout the book (80).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), x, 140–41, 174.

screeching, and subways roaring would make it virtually impossible to hear a cricket, even if one were present. But, the Indian was insistent. He stopped his friend and began to crisscross the street and sidewalks with his head cocked to one side, intently listening. Then, in a large cement planter where a tree was growing, he finally found the cricket and held it up for his friend's benefit. Amazed, his friend asked how he could have possibly heard that cricket. Reaching into his pocket, the Indian grasped some coins, held them waist high, then dropped them on the sidewalk. Everyone within a block turned to look in their direction. As Swindoll explains, "It all depends on what you're listening for. We don't have enough crickets in our heads. We don't listen for them. Perhaps you have spent all your life searching for a handful of change and you've missed the real sound of life."<sup>11</sup>

"Shepherding the wind" provides another way to translate "striving after wind" (v. 14).<sup>12</sup> The Preacher depicts how endlessly men and women can analyze life without living it for God. Ecclesiastes reveals that the search to answer all of life's conundrums is like trying to shepherd the wind—to attempt to push the wind into a pen of one's own making.

Verse 15 concludes this section (vv. 13–15) with a proverb. Solomon is renowned for his proverbs—he composed at least 3,000 (1 Kgs 4:32). What he did not compose, he had collected and compiled into an incomparable collection of wisdom (Eccl 12:9). According to this proverb, "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted." In other words, No one can change all that is done under heaven. The only One Who can change such things is God Himself (cp. 7:13; Jer 13:23). The proverb drives home the conclusion that the labors of mankind living under the sun are ultimately unprofitable (v. 3), unsatisfying (v. 8), unremarkable (vv. 9–10), and unremembered (v. 11). That's life. That's the way it is—we cannot alter it.

If the task of investigation through wisdom (v. 13) cannot bring about the change, could wisdom itself (v. 16) be profitable, satisfying, remarkable, and memorable? Obtaining additional wisdom and knowledge proves to be nothing more than "striving after wind" (v. 17).

Ever ready with a proverb, Solomon recites another: "With much wisdom comes much grief; the greater one's knowledge, the greater the sorrow" (v. 18, paraphrased). The more knowledge the old king obtains, the deeper his grief becomes. Humanly speaking, there is no way out of the quagmire into which he has fallen. Each new tidbit of information only plunges him deeper into his hopelessness. Solomon knows better than to worship idols. Given fantastic wisdom from God, the king has squandered it. A brilliant beginning moves inexorably to a sordid ending. Everything confirms his humanity, his sinfulness, his accountability, and his inevitable death. With an increasingly heavy heart, Solomon's research is driving him to a heart-wrenching conclusion: he cannot save himself. No person can.

What more can he do? Is it time to give up? With time so very short, what might possibly provide the greatest benefit? Like many an individual before or since, King Solomon turns from serious pursuits to the pursuit of pleasure (2:1–11).

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<sup>11</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 26–27. Swindoll's book is a verse by verse study of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

<sup>12</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 124.