

“Here Today, Gone Tomorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

Have you made any New Year’s resolutions to lose weight and get into shape? Many Americans have great intentions at the start of a new year. Perhaps you have already purchased a gym membership or a piece of exercise equipment. If so, good for you! It’s important to get in shape and be healthy. I own a recumbent bike...and I love it. I work out on it nearly every day. I cycle miles on this bike and burn calories and increase my heart rate. The cool thing is: I don’t even have to leave my house...and in the rainy Pacific Northwest, this is a blessing. But if I am honest, it is a terribly boring and tedious way to exercise. When I look down at the odometer and it says I’ve cycled five miles, I’ve actually gone nowhere. I work up a sweat and ride until I am weary, yet I know that I am going to have to hop back on the bike all over again tomorrow. It is rather depressing!

Life is like riding on a recumbent bike. It is a boring, tedious, and repetitive ride. A thoughtful person will ask, “What is the purpose in life?” Have you ever asked this question? Most people have. For some of us, this question has plagued us over the course of our lives...even our Christian lives. A few years ago, scientists at John Hopkins University surveyed nearly 8,000 college students at forty-eight universities and asked what they considered “very important” to them. What do you think these college students said? Make a lot of money? Get married? Get a job? Buy a home? I can tell you this: only 16 percent answered “making a lot of money.” But a whopping 75 percent said that their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life.”¹ This is a staggering piece of research, isn’t it?

In this New Year, maybe you are seeking to discover a purpose and meaning to your life. If so, the book of Ecclesiastes will guide you in this endeavor...but not in the way you might think.² Ecclesiastes has been dubbed, “the strangest book in the cannon [Bible].”³ It is an enigma for many Christians, for the bulk of this book is the memoirs of a man that is sharing his observations about what is wrong with life. In Eccl 1:1-11, we learn that life is fleeting and disappointing.

1. Life is fleeting (1:1-7). In this first section, we will come to grips with the temporary nature of life. In the first three verses, the author introduces himself and his theme. Verse 1 begins: “**The words⁴ of the Preacher,⁵ the son of David, king in Jerusalem.**”⁶ Although our author chooses not to identify himself, his titles or pen names give him away as Solomon.⁷ Solomon’s story is recorded for us in the first eleven chapters of 1 Kings. Although King David had many sons, it was his son Solomon who was chosen to be heir to the throne. God so favored Solomon that He appeared to him in a dream offering Solomon whatever blessing he desired. Solomon astutely asked God for wisdom to lead the nation well. He asked for wisdom instead of riches and fame. God honored Solomon’s request, granting him not just unparalleled wisdom, but wealth and recognition as well.

Solomon wrote three books of the Bible: Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. He is considered the wisest and perhaps richest man that has ever lived. He had a fleet of ships that would bring gold to him every day from far off lands. Tragically, Solomon married a foreign woman, which was forbidden by God because of the temptation to be led astray spiritually. Ironically, it was this unwise decision to gain favor from different nations by taking foreign wives that diverted Solomon’s eyes from the one true God. Scripture records that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Truly, this diverted Solomon’s devotion, so that it is often said of him that he had a divided heart.

If we were to depict Solomon as someone more modern, he might be considered a mix between Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Hugh Hefner, and Brad Pitt. In Ecclesiastes, what philosophical conclusions does this rich powerful genius come to after living a life with everything at his fingertips? We would expect Solomon’s sermon to be entitled “Seven Habits of Highly Successful Kings.”⁸ In 1:2, Solomon gives the theme of his book.

“**‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’**” This preacher fails to start his sermon with a compelling introduction. There is no attention-grabbing illustration. There is no appeal to felt needs. There is no whetting of the spiritual appetite so his audience will want to hear more. The one called “the Preacher” violates a basic preaching principle. He tells his readers up front that he has nothing to say because “all is vanity.” (Aren’t you glad you are reading this?) I regret to say that the translation “vanity” is not the best rendering of the Hebrew word *hebel*, for in our contemporary speech we typically connect vanity with arrogance. Unfortunately, many contemporary English versions continue to follow the Old English of the KJV. Nevertheless, there is great debate on what the term *hebel* means. Does it mean temporary⁹ or meaningless?¹⁰ It would seem that the word carries both ideas and even a few others. *Hebel* is an inexhaustible term.¹¹ It can mean “vapor, deceitful, futile,¹² and fleeting.”¹³ It points to what is without real substance, value, permanence, or significance.¹⁴ In other words, no person or pursuit in and of itself will bring lasting satisfaction. Everything is temporal. It may be that the modern Christian reader can do no better than to import *hebel* into his or her vocabulary, much as has been done with *agape* and to a lesser extent *koinonia*. Everything is *hebel* and therefore of no lasting value.

In this one verse, Solomon uses the word *hebel* five times. *Hebel* appears thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes and only thirty-five other times elsewhere in the Old Testament. The term is used in every chapter of Ecclesiastes with the exception of chapter ten. It also brackets the book (see 12:8). Furthermore, Solomon uses a literary device to bring out a supreme emphasis: “vapor of vapors—the thinnest of vapors.” The Old Testament authors spoke of the “holy of holies,” “heaven of heavens,” and “servant of servants.”¹⁵ Solomon says that everything in life falls under this definition. Whatever *hebel* is, the world is full of it! The word “all” in the context of what he proceeds to describe refers to all human endeavors (cf. 1:3).¹⁶ This verse is blunt; it is intended to shock the reader out of complacency. It is designed to rock the boat, shake the tree, and pull the chain.¹⁷

If the above explanation is a bit much for you, let me explain *hebel* another way. [Take a balloon out of my pocket.] This blue balloon represents your life at birth. I will now provide a visual of your lifespan. [Blow up the balloon.] At the end of your life, this is what happens. [Release the inflated balloon and let it sputter into the crowd.]

Life is not totally meaningless or without any ultimate purpose. The point that Solomon is making is that you live for seventy or eighty years and then you’re gone. Materially speaking, life is short and then you die. You will lose everything you own to the next generation. Your children will rent out your house, purge your possessions, and spend your inheritance. Ultimately, you will be a distant memory at a Thanksgiving meal.¹⁸

Solomon follows up his theme with a rhetorical question that demands a negative answer. In 1:3 he asks, **“What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”** The answer is there is no advantage. Work seems pointless because it is quickly passing. Furthermore, it is monotonous. The key phrase in Ecclesiastes, “under the sun,” is used twenty-nine times.¹⁹ This phrase is the key to understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon is writing from his viewpoint—ground level, horizontal, limited, and human. In these words we have a description of what life is like if the heavens are shut off from man. If a bowl were placed over the earth, masking the heavens (i.e., the spiritual world from which God speaks and acts), what would life be like? Given this perspective, what would be the view from earth? This is the experiment which is in focus in the book of Ecclesiastes.²⁰

Moms understand the truth of this verse. Whether it is washing dishes, cleaning sinks, scouring toilets, or washing floors, there is always more to be done. Not to mention, chasing toddlers, mediating fights between siblings, grocery shopping, and playing taxi in your minivan. My wife informs me that preparing creative, well-balanced meals that everyone is ready to devour without complaining is her most challenging responsibility, on top of everything else she is responsible for.

Men can relate to this verse as well. After working and commuting fifty hours a week, you then come home to more work: mowing the lawn, cleaning the garage, changing the oil in the car, doing the taxes, and playing with the kids. All of these responsibilities come at you day-in and day-out. There is no rest for the righteous (or for you either).

This past Christmas, Lori and I purchased three hamsters for our children. From my perspective as a human being, these hamsters don't do a whole lot. They sleep during the day and play at night, while we sleep. They eat, drink, and make messes. Then it dawned on me: If a hamster viewed most of our lives, he or she would see a vicious cycle as well. We get up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch TV, go to bed, and repeat the cycle all over again, until retirement. Our lives are short and boring. It makes one want to say, "Stop the insanity!"

To clarify his meaning and to support his contention in 1:3, Solomon cites four examples from nature. In 1:4-7, Solomon answers his own question: There is no advantage for one to work from earth's perspective because everyone is caught in the unending and unalterable cycles of life.²¹

- ***The Earth (1:4).*** The transitory nature of human generations contrasts with the permanence and apparent immutability of the physical world. Solomon writes, "**A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.**" You are born into the world, you live your life, and then you die, but the earth keeps right on going. Birth announcements are on one page and obituaries are on the next. Generations passing parade. It's like you're walking across the desert, leaving footprints in the sand that the wind erases as though you were never there.²²
- ***The Sun (1:5).*** Solomon writes, "**Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again.**" The sun is on a monotonous cycle of rising, setting, and then racing back to the place from which it rises. The verb translated "hastening" means "to pant." The sun is like a runner endlessly making his way around a racetrack. As each generation comes and goes, so also each day comes and goes with a regular and monotonous passing. It has been said, "The problem with daily living is that it is so DAILY."
- ***The Wind (1:6).***²³ "**Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses the wind returns.**" As the movement of the sun implies an east-west course, now the wind is described as moving north and south. The repetition in "going round and round" heightens the sense of monotony and purposelessness.
- ***The Rivers (1:7).*** "**All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.**" The sense of accomplishing nothing is reinforced here. The rivers continually empty into the sea but cannot fill it. The last phrase does not refer to the cycle of evaporation and rainfall as implied in the NIV translation. The implication here is not cyclic motion but futile activity.

These verses profoundly impress certain sensations on the reader. First, there is a sense of the indifference of the universe to our presence. It was here before we came, and it will be here, unchanged, after we have gone. Second, however, the universe, like us, is trapped in a cycle of monotonous and meaningless motion. It is forever moving, but it accomplishes nothing. Finally, a sense of loneliness and abandonment pervades the text. No one has described this better than the apostle Paul. The creation is "subjected to frustration," in "bondage to decay," and awaiting "freedom" (Rom 8:19-21).²⁴

[Solomon has argued that life is fleeting. In 1:8-11, he shares a second problem with life.]

2. Life is Disappointing (1:8-11). In these next four verses, Solomon demonstrates that everything and everyone in life will ultimately disappoint us. There are three basic reasons for this: There is no satisfaction under the sun, there is nothing new under the sun, and no one is remembered under the sun.

- **No satisfaction under the sun (1:8).** Solomon states that nothing is truly fulfilling. He writes, **“All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.”**²⁵ The Rolling Stones made famous the song, “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction.” Sadly, this song could have been written by Solomon himself. Just like Mick Jagger and the rest of the Stones, Solomon had it all...and then some, yet everything was wearisome to him since one can never say, see, or hear enough. Man just can’t get NO satisfaction! Have you seen a good movie? Read a good book? Listened to a great song? Enjoyed a restful vacation? Delighted in a special experience? It is never enough. It never satisfies, for ultimately you want MORE.
- **Nothing new under the sun (1:9-10).** Solomon writes, **“That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, ‘See this, it is new’? Already it has existed for ages which were before us.”** The French have a proverb that goes: “The more things change, the more they turn out to be the same.” While there are new inventions, and God does do new things, Solomon is talking about how man can never be satisfied “under the sun.” Solomon is saying that there is no advantage for one to work from earth’s perspective because one’s work will never result in anything new, but only that which has been. If it appears that something new happens from time to time, it is only because our memories are short.²⁶ Seriously, most of us don’t know history, so we keep thinking we’re coming up with new ideas!²⁷ We often mistake movement with progress. We think we are making progress but in reality we are driving around a cul-de-sac and wondering why the neighborhoods all look the same.

Some people track their year, not on the basis of the months or seasons but on sports: baseball in the summer, football in the fall, basketball and hockey in the winter, and NASCAR in the spring. Where do you go when you conclude that there is nothing truly meaningful in life? Back to the stadium, where at least there are games with consistent rules, rewards, and penalties.²⁸

- **Not remembered (1:11).** Solomon writes, **“There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, there will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.”** We need not look any further than the sports page to have this verified. One injury is all it takes to become forgotten. Household names can be discarded quickly. Yet the simple truth is: No one will remember anyone in the future. One hundred years from now everything and everyone will have been forgotten, regardless of what occurs today.

There is good news and bad news in 1:11. The good news is for those people who worry about what others think about them. In the end, no one will think about you at all. The bad news is for those who seek some type of temporal immortality. In the end, no one will think about you at all.²⁹

When you die, there will be a funeral. You may have twenty-five or 2,000 people attend. But do you know what they’ll do after the funeral? They will catch lunch and have a great old time together. Then they will hurry back to work because somebody was covering for them. That night they’ll go home to their families, watch a sitcom rerun, and forget all about your memorial by morning. Are you ready for that?³⁰ Mark Twain was right, “The world will lament you for an hour and forget you forever.”³¹

Perhaps this makes you feel empty. That's exactly what Solomon is seeking to accomplish. He wants you to feel an overwhelming sense of emptiness, for emptiness is designed to draw us to God. We must learn to value emptiness. As we acknowledge our sense of meaninglessness, we are motivated to search for more. We must learn to value emptiness for its positive potential. As an empty cup invites water or a vacant room invites entrance, so an empty heart can lead us to search for God-given ways to fill it.³²

By putting on biblical binoculars, we can see how Solomon concludes his book. In 12:13-14 he writes, **“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”** These two verses and the message of the Bible tell us that *the best way to live under the sun is to live in the Son*. The good news is that God has not left us “under the sun.” If you have believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior, life is not “under the sun” but rather *in the SON*. He brings purpose, peace, and significance. He gives you the opportunity to live an abundant life (John 10:10). However, the Bible is clear that apart from the Lord Jesus life under the sun is terribly disappointing. It is cursed! It is disjointed! It is upside down! It is in bondage to decay! It is meaningless! It needs to be liberated!³³ This will happen when we leave this life and go and be with Jesus.

In the meantime, *the best way to live under the sun is to live in the Son*. This means we must “fear God and obey His commandments...for God will bring every act into judgment.” The question of 1:3 is the most important question of the book: **“What advantage³⁴ does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”** Solomon's concern is what do humans have “left over” after life is over. What difference do the activities of this life have in the next life? Does anything last beyond the grave? Can we make certain (beyond the shadow of a doubt...beyond the shadow of death) that what we do in this life has some lasting value? This should be the key question of our lives (and of the lives of all other people). What can we do to guarantee a return on our life-investment?³⁵ The answer that Solomon gives is to fear God and obey His commandments. When we do this, our fleeting lives begin to count for eternity. The disappointments that we experience in this life are bearable. When everything around us seems meaningless and monotonous, Christ—the Meaning in life, gives us meaning. When we are weary from the wearisome nature of life, Christ says, “Come to Me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). When we can't get no satisfaction under the sun, we can find satisfaction in the Son. When we can't find anything new, we remember that Christ has created a new covenant, given the new birth, and new life. When we feel like no one will ever remember us, we can take confidence in the truth that God remembers us, and one day we can overcome this world and receive a new name that Christ Himself will give to us. In the meantime, *the best way to live under the sun is to live in the Son*.

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Scripture References

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Genesis 3:17-19

Psalm 19:1-6

Psalm 90:1-17

Job 1:21; 20:20-22

James 4:13-17

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Study Questions

1. In what ways would I agree with Solomon that life “under the sun” is empty (1:2-3)? What is an area in my life that has recently seemed meaningless or futile? In what ways do I sense that people around me live with a sense of despair and hopelessness? How can I minister to them and provide hope?
2. What “advantage” does my work have (1:3)? How does my work seem to be an exercise in futility? Why then do I allow work to consume me? How can I cultivate a healthy work mindset?
3. How does the fleeting nature of life humble me (1:4)? Read Psalm 39:4-6; 90:9-12; and James 4:13-17. Why does the Bible emphasize the brevity of life? What will it take for me to maximize my life and the allotted days that God has given me? What would I like God to accomplish in and through me in 2008?
4. What does the monotony of the universe teach me about my life (1:5-7)? Why does God frequently bring up the world He has created to illustrate His Word? What can I learn from the way God has created the universe?
5. Solomon says life does not satisfy because nothing is new and no one is remembered (1:8-11). When have I found this to be true in my own life? How has this made me feel? Since I know what the Bible teaches about the temporary nature of satisfaction and recognition, how should I then live?

Notes

¹ David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), xv.

² I strongly recommend the following journal articles: Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:638 (April-June 2003): 159-73; 160:639 (July-September 2003): 283-304.

³ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), vii, 10.

⁴ As is the case with other OT wisdom literature, the author of Ecclesiastes identified the book as his own. Solomon's use of "words" (see also Prov 1:6; 22:17; 24:23) means something like an "official collection of teachings." Sages like Agur and Lemuel (Prov 30:1; 31:1) and prophets like Amos (1:1) and Jeremiah (1:1) had sets of their proverbs and oracles so labeled by those who collected and preserved them for posterity sake. How the author and other wise teachers went about their work is described with some detail in the conclusion (12:9-10).

⁵ Solomon also begins Proverbs by quickly stating his theme in 1:7: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

⁶ The title of this book in the Hebrew text is all of 1:1. The Septuagint translation (a third century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew text) gave it the name "Ekklesiastes" from which the English title is a transliteration. This word is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qohelet* that the NASB translated "Preacher" in 1:1. The Hebrew word designates a leader who speaks before an assembly of people.

⁷ Even those that disagree with Solomonic authorship must acknowledge that his life is being examined.

⁸ Charlie Bing: "Wisdom for the Real World" (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2): unpublished sermon notes.

⁹ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC Vol. 23a; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 3-4.

¹⁰ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 60-63.

¹¹ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 47-48; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1993); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grad Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 156-157.

¹² See NET and HSB.

¹³ See Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament; Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 56. See NIV and NLT. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 61-63. The word can have the meaning "breath" or "vapor" (Job 7:16; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13), but in most cases, the word means "meaningless."

¹⁴ For an excellent study on the Hebrew term *hebel* see M. James Sawyer, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes": http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1632.

¹⁵ Similarly, the NT authors called Jesus "King of Kings" or "Lord of Lords."

¹⁶ The phrase "is vanity" is the most popular one in Ecclesiastes (1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8, 17). It forms an *inclusio* with 12:8 surrounding the evidence that Solomon offered to prove that all is vanity.

¹⁷ Daniel Hill, "Ecclesiastes": <http://www.gracenotes.info/>.

¹⁸ Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 11.

¹⁹ "Under the sun," used 29 times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the OT, simply means "on the earth," that is, in terms of human existence (1:9, 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, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5; cf. 1:13; 2:3; 3:1). The phrase shows that the writer's perspective was universal, not limited to his own people and land. Longman points out that this phrase is similar to "under heaven" (Exod 17:14; Deut 7:24; 19:14; Eccl 2:3; 3:1) and "on earth" (Eccl 5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2). Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 65.

²⁰ Steve Zeisler, "Is Life a Treadmill" (Ecclesiastes 1:1-12): <http://www.pbc.org/files/messages/7067/4083.html>.

²¹ Albert Einstein has been quoted as saying: "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible." See www.infoplease.com/cig/theories-universe/scientific-origins-universe.html.

²² Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 13.

²³ Solomon is particularly interested in the wind. He refers to it once in the Song of Solomon, six times in Proverbs, and fourteen times in Ecclesiastes. Jesus also spoke of the wind when he was sharing the gospel with Nicodemus (John 3:8).

²⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*,

²⁵ This last phrase is a loose quotation of Prov 27:20: "As Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so the eyes of a person are never satisfied" (NET).

²⁶ Ronald B. Allen, "Ecclesiastes," in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 781.

²⁷ David Fairchild, “Futility Under The Sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11):

²⁸ Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth*, 12.

²⁹ Ray Pritchard, *Something New Under the Sun: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Living* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 29.

³⁰ Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 12.

³¹ Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 5.

³² Wayne Schmidt, *Soul Management* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 15. Schmidt quotes David Augsburger who states, “Emptiness is at the center of our humanness. To flee it is to miss the creative openness toward creation and Creator. To stuff it full of things is to block our ability to receive others in listening love. To anesthetize it with addictive experiences is to deaden the creative springs of the true self. Emptiness is to be embraced as a gift.” See David Augsburger, *When Enough Is Enough* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 52.

³³ Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986): 55.

³⁴ The noun *yithron* (“advantage, profit, excess”) appears only in the book of Ecclesiastes in the following passages: Eccl 1:3; 2:11, 13 [twice]; 3:9; 5:8, 15; 7:12; 10:10, 11. Profit is always on our minds (e.g., profit margins profit shares). God has wired us this way; however, He wants us to look toward eternal profit.

³⁵ Barry C. Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class notes.