

PP Ecclesiastes: Life Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, Part 1, Introduction

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Have you ever wondered why this book is titled, Ecclesiastes?

PP The root is the Greek word, *Ekklesia*, the common word for church in the New Testament

The whole word Ecclesiastes stands for one who speaks in the church, a preacher

The preacher is identified as *'the son of David, king in Jerusalem'* but as usual, modern scholars have introduced skepticism to the long-held view that he is Solomon

I will side with older commentators who were convinced it was Solomon preaching a message learned from a life of hedonistic pursuit and crushing disappointment

Many believe that Solomon wrote Song of Songs as a young man, Proverbs in his mid-life, and Ecclesiastes as an older man whose great wisdom finally bore fruit

Ecclesiastes has the feel of an author near the end of his life, and it is exceedingly complex

Martin Luther said of it, **PP** *"This book is one of the more difficult books in all of scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered."*

So imagine that an older Solomon, steps behind the pulpit, takes a deep breath and begins to preach a message so powerful, it is as relevant today as it was then

Perhaps you were taught like I was that when writing an essay, you begin with the introduction, then the body, and finally the conclusion

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 is the introduction, and with it Solomon presents his main thesis: *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"* **1:2-3**

PP 1-What is the meaning of 'vanity'?

The words *'vanity'* and *'vanities'* are found 38 times, 5 of them are in the first line of the sermon. In the absence of underlines, bold font, exclamation points, the Hebrew way of creating a memorable point was through superlatives, which could be done by repetition

But let me illustrate the word for you before I define it

Two of the mornings this past week I drove in to the office in a morning fog, which burned off minutes later

It won't be long before you step outside and exhale plumes of vapor in the cold air

Perhaps this summer, you and your kids took a wand and bubble solution and blew bubbles that lasted seconds before bursting

Let me further illustrate it by showing you how it is used in other parts of scripture

PP *"Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."* **Psalm 144:4**

PP *"Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!"* **Psalm 39:5**

James seemed to coopt the word in his epistle: **PP** *"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."* **James 4:14**

You may find it interesting to know that the Hebrew word for vanity, is the same spelling for the first human being to die, Abel...whose life was cut short by Cain

But flip forward to **Ecclesiastes 6:12** and you'll see an added dimension to the word

"For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow?"

PP *'Vanity'* then speaks of that which is brief, insubstantial, now you see it, now you don't

PP 2-Why is everything a vanity of vanities?

“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun” 1:3

After stating that everything is vanity, he states his thesis, the gain we seek is not available with anything ***‘under the sun’***

To use a financial phrase, pursuing what is under the sun will yield no return on investment

The entire book, until his concluding thoughts, will explain and illustrate this point: no gain can be found in anything under the sun because everything under the sun is vanity of vanities

PP When you see the word ***‘vanity’*** through this book, connect it automatically to ***‘curse’***

You see, God created this world and every square inch of it was saturated with His glory

It reflected Who He is: His beauty, His love for creative order, His peacefulness

It did, until Adam and Eve sinned, fracturing it all into a million broken shards

The result of this sin brought about God’s immediate judgment upon His entire creation

The universe itself began to move from order to disorder

Human and animal cells began to die and death became the eventual end of all life

Work became toil, with thorns and thistles

Pain in childbirth is greatly increased, but raising that baby will now be fraught with sorrow

And terribly, after God imposed His righteous judgment on Adam and Eve, **PP** “Then the LORD

God said, ***“Behold, the man has become like one of Us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—”***

therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden He placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” **Genesis 3:22-24**

The very next chapter tells the tale of humanity’s first murder, Cain killing his brother Abel

God handed him the sentence for his crime, part of which included, **PP** ***“Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”***

Genesis 4:16

The theme in Ecclesiastes is that everything under the sun is under this curse, we all live east of Eden, life is a vanity of vanities

33 times Solomon will reiterate, that life under the sun is full of vanity

PP Everything under the sun is everything this world offers apart from God; it is temporary, and lacks substance like a shadow that disappears as the sun rises

Vanity then speaks of the transitory, insubstantial nature of all things under the sun

There is no gain from looking at this world to satisfy you, for everything in this life is temporary, fleeting, short-lived, fading away

John Wesley preached through this book and said, **PP** ***“[Its] grand truth [is] that there is no happiness out of God.”***

There is nothing east of Eden, under the sun that can, in and of itself, bring satisfaction

Ecclesiastes has the power of the gospel to bring us to that place where we apart from God we are ruined...the reason God sent all sinners into the land east of Eden

It is only when we see the brevity of our life, the inevitable death coming for us, the thinness of life apart from God, that the gasping lungs of our souls cry out for God

It is how Jesus began His great sermon: **PP** ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** **Matthew 5:3**

Are you tired, weary, hopeless and helpless?

Then you are experiencing the result of a life lived *‘under the sun’*, and you are on the threshold of the greatest life change you could ever experience...salvation

PP 3-What is the evidence there is no gain under the sun?

Solomon is a master at what every good preacher has to learn to do and that is anticipate objections in the minds of his audience, called the Socratic method

It's Mixed Martial Arts style teaching where you force a submission from the skeptic, who is likely reacting, *‘Solomon, I like my life just fine, so maybe the problem is you’*

So Solomon states some basic general observations

“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.” 1:3-6

PP a. *Everything under the sun grinds on in unending monotony*

Life goes on with or without you on this planet

After your death, you will be a memory that comes up around the Thanksgiving table by your kids and grandkids and eventually you'll fade from the memory of those that come after

After people leave your graveside service, they will be heading back to work, or to the luncheon that follows wondering what food will be there

The day I am put in the ground, the sun will have come up that morning, and it'll set that evening

After I'm gone the wind will still blow...the 4 seasons will come as they always have

In other words, neither your life, or your death will affect the way things operate under the sun

So why are you running after the things of this world when it won't even notice when you're gone?

What gain is there in making your mark in this world, or getting that position in your career?

You'll be forgotten and replaced

For those who live with their eye on what can be gained under the sun, it is total loss

But Solomon is setting us up to convince us there is a life above the sun, and you can live with

your eye on that and the gain is incalculable

But the skeptic might slip the submission hold, so Solomon goes to his next technique

PP b. *Everything under the sun is tired*

“All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” 1:7-8

You may have heard Greek tale of Sisyphus, condemned by Zeus to roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to crest the top and roll down, made to do it all over again, and again, and again

The Rolling Stones captured this vanity well with their song, *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*

It's been said that man is the only creature that will speed up when lost

If you're not getting satisfied, then the pace picks up to try all you can

All things are full of weariness means everything under the sun: humanity and creation

No wonder **Romans 8:20-21** says, **PP** *“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”*

You can't wait to get your license, go to college and then I'll be free and happy

But college is tedious and boring, so you can't wait to graduate and get a job you really love

But then you can't wait to get married, then you'll be happy

You get married, but soon the missing piece in your happiness is kids, so you start a family

But the you need a promotion so you can provide a better life and bigger home for the kids

It never ends: *If I can just get there, or get that then my life will be complete...* but it never is

PP c. Everything under the sun is the same old same old

Solomon puts his chokehold on the skeptic and says, *“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us.”* 1:9-10

There's nothing new under the sun that can bring gain, a positive return on investment

He's not talking about technological advances but about what the soul reaches for to satisfy itself

Allistair Begg said, **PP** *“Yes, we put a man on the moon, but there was nothing for him to do there except stare at the earth.”*

The old adage is correct, *The more things change, the more they stay the same*

The skeptic hasn't tapped out yet, so Solomon tightens the hold a bit more, *“There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.”* 1:11

You might object that we remember some notable people, Solomon included

But he means that the vast majority of billions of people are forgotten soon after their gone

Fall Out Boy might sing that they will be remembered for centuries, they won't be

PP Les Miserables wrestles with this very fact: *“Will the world remember you when you fall? Could it be your death means nothing at all? Is your life just one more lie?”*

He has concluded his introduction, he's made his thesis clear

Living for what is under the sun will make your brief life utterly unsatisfying, ungainful

It will ruin your soul if you look for fulfillment east of Eden

You must be like Abraham and move from the east to the west, you must cross the Jordan from the east to the west side, you must enter the temple of God from the east and travel west to His mercy seat, for like Tolkien showed, the ship of your life must sail into the west

That ship, that river, that mercy seat is found in one who is greater than Solomon, Jesus Christ

There is another life above the sun, and to enter that life, you can only do so through Him

You must confess that your sins drove you out of the presence of God, and believe that His death and resurrection can bring you back

When He does He will make you a new creation that lives under the sun with an eye on eternity

The journey that Solomon takes us on will be jarring, thrilling, convicting but it can be transforming

Let's pray