

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Vanity of Vanities: The Preacher's Search Begins

Ecclesiastes 1:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help students rightly read the Preacher's realism: “vanity” means a fleeting breath or vapor, and “under the sun” describes life viewed within the horizon of this fallen world apart from the full hope of eternity. This honesty is meant to drive us to fear God, not toward nihilism or despair.

Guard the class from two errors: hearing Ecclesiastes as teaching that life is meaningless, and using its hard sayings to excuse worldly cynicism. Read every difficult verse in light of the whole canon and the book's own conclusion in 12:13–14.

Point students forward to Christ, the wisdom of God, in whom the restlessness Solomon names finds its rest, so that the lesson ends not in despair but in a heart lifted above the sun toward the Lord.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 the Preacher declares, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The word translated “vanity” pictures a breath or vapor. What is Solomon actually claiming about life “under the sun,” and how is this realism different from saying that life is simply meaningless?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The book opens by identifying its author as “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The Hebrew title is Qoheleth, one who gathers or assembles, hence “Preacher” or “Assembler.” The description fits Solomon, the wisest and wealthiest of Israel's kings, who alone among David's sons reigned over a united Israel in Jerusalem. His credentials matter: this is not the complaint of a man who failed at life, but the verdict of a man who succeeded at everything the world offers and still found it wanting.

The thunderclap of the book is 1:2, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” The Hebrew word *hebel* literally means a breath, a vapor, the puff of air you see on a cold morning that is gone before you can grab it. “Vanity of vanities” is a Hebrew superlative, like “Holy of Holies,” meaning the utmost emptiness. Solomon is not first of all saying life is wicked or worthless; he is saying it is fleeting, insubstantial, impossible to hold onto. You cannot grasp a vapor in your fist.

The crucial phrase that governs the whole book appears here and again and again: “under the sun.” Solomon is deliberately framing his investigation. He is looking at life from ground level,

within the horizon of this present, fallen world, bracketing out for the sake of argument the fuller hope of eternity. He wants to show us honestly what life amounts to if this world is all there is. That is very different from saying this world is all there is.

This is why we must read Ecclesiastes carefully. The realism of the book is a tool, not a conclusion. The Preacher leads us down every avenue the world calls meaningful, lets us feel how each one comes up empty, and by the end drives us to the only solid ground: “Fear God, and keep his commandments” (12:13). The hard honesty of chapter 1 is meant to clear away our illusions so that we will finally look up, above the sun, to the God who made us for Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The meaning of hebel as breath or vapor, not philosophical nihilism
- “Under the sun” as the controlling lens: life within this fallen horizon
- Realism in Scripture is meant to drive us to God, not to despair
- Solomon's unmatched credentials lend weight to his verdict
- Reading any one verse in light of the whole book and the whole canon (12:13–14; Romans 15:4)
- The fleeting nature of life as a summons to seek what is lasting

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between saying life is “a vapor” and saying life is “meaningless”?
- Why does it matter that the man saying this had tasted everything the world offers?
- How does the phrase “under the sun” set up the rest of the book?

Question 2

Student Question:

Solomon asks in 1:3, “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” Where in your own life have you poured great effort into something only to feel that lasting “profit” slipped through your fingers, and what did that teach you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 3 presses the question that haunts the book: “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” The word “profit” is a commercial term, the bottom line, what is left over after all the accounting is done. Solomon is asking what permanent gain remains from all our toil once the dust settles. Viewed only under the sun, the honest answer is unsettling.

This question lands on every honest worker. We labor for the paycheck, the house, the reputation, the comfortable retirement, and Solomon does not say these things are evil. He simply asks what abiding profit they leave. The promotion fades into routine. The savings can be

spent in an afternoon. The reputation is forgotten a generation later. He is not stealing the joy of work; he is exposing the lie that our work alone can finally satisfy us.

Scripture elsewhere teaches that labor is good and God-given. God put Adam in the garden to dress and keep it before sin ever entered (Genesis 2:15), and Paul tells Christians that whatever we do, we are to do it heartily as to the Lord (Colossians 3:23–24). The difference is the direction of the labor. Work “under the sun” for its own sake comes back empty; work done “in the Lord” is “not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The teacher should let students feel the personal weight of this. Most people have poured themselves into something, a project, a goal, a possession, only to be surprised by how quickly it lost its shine. That experience is not a failure of effort; it is Solomon's point coming true in real time. It is meant to loosen our grip on the temporary and lift our eyes to the One who alone gives lasting profit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The good of work versus the idolatry of work
- “Profit” as lasting gain, not mere activity
- Labor “in the Lord” is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58)
- The fading shine of earthly achievements
- Discerning what we are really laboring for

Discussion Prompts

- What have you worked hardest for, and did the result last as long as the effort?
- How can a Christian work hard without making work an idol?
- What does it look like to do ordinary work “as to the Lord”?

Question 3

Student Question:

In 1:4–7 Solomon points to the sun, the wind, and the rivers, endlessly moving yet never coming to rest. What is he teaching about the created order and the limits of life lived only within this fallen world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In 1:4–7 Solomon turns from human labor to the rhythms of creation itself. Generations come and go, but “the earth abideth for ever.” The sun rises and sets and hurries back to rise again. The wind whirls about continually, circling and returning. The rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is never full, and the water cycles back to run the rivers again. It is a portrait of ceaseless motion that never arrives at rest.

Solomon is not denying that God designed these cycles; he is observing what they feel like to a watching soul. The created order is in constant labor, going and going, yet from ground level it seems to get nowhere. There is movement without resolution, activity without arrival. The very faithfulness of nature, which we might call beautiful, here underscores the weariness of a world that cannot bring itself to a finish.

Scripture helps us read this rightly. Paul says creation itself “was made subject to vanity” and “groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,” not hopelessly, but “in hope” of redemption (Romans 8:20–22). The futility Solomon observes is real, a mark of a world under the curse, yet it is not the final word. Creation is waiting for something, and so are we.

The pastoral lesson is that life within this fallen horizon has built-in limits. We were not made to find ultimate rest in cycles that never rest. Augustine's famous line catches Solomon's point: our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. The endless turning of sun and wind and river is meant to make us long for the rest that only the Creator gives (Hebrews 4:9–10).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Creation's cycles as constant motion without arrival
- Creation “subject to vanity” yet waiting in hope (Romans 8:20–22)
- The limits of life within this fallen world
- The restless heart made for rest in God
- God as Creator and sustainer of the natural order
- Longing for the rest God provides (Hebrews 4:9–10)

Discussion Prompts

- What does the picture of endless cycles stir in you when you really sit with it?
- How does Romans 8 keep us from despairing over the futility Solomon describes?
- Where do you look for rest, and where does true rest come from?

Question 4

Student Question:

The rivers “run into the sea; yet the sea is not full” (1:7). In what ways have you experienced this restlessness, pouring yourself into pursuits that never seem to fill you up? How does that point your heart toward God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 7 gives a haunting image: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full.” Pour and pour and pour, and the sea is never satisfied. Solomon offers it as a picture of the human pursuit that never reaches enough. We pour effort, money, attention, and longing into the things we believe will fill us, and somehow the reservoir of our hearts is never full.

This is one of the most personally searching truths in the chapter. Many of us live as though we are one purchase, one achievement, one relationship, one milestone away from finally feeling full. Solomon, who actually obtained all of it, tells us the sea does not fill that way. The appetite outruns every supply this world can pour in.

The reason is that we were made for God, and only an infinite God can fill a soul shaped for Him. Jesus said it plainly: whoever drinks of ordinary water will thirst again, but the water He gives becomes “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:13–14). The restless sea of the human heart is meant to send us to the living water, not to one more dry riverbed.

The teacher should invite honest reflection here without condemnation. Naming the pursuits that have left us empty is not a confession of weakness; it is the beginning of wisdom. When we admit that the sea of our striving is never full, we are finally ready to stop pouring into it and to turn to the One who satisfies the longing soul (Psalm 107:9).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unfillable sea as a picture of restless human longing
- The lie of “one more thing” will finally satisfy
- Made for God, satisfied only in Him
- Christ as the living water (John 4:13–14)
- Naming our empty pursuits as the beginning of turning to God

Discussion Prompts

- What have you poured yourself into that never seemed to fill you up?
- Why can no created thing finally satisfy a soul made for God?
- What does it mean for Christ to be the living water for your thirst?

Question 5

Student Question:

Solomon writes in 1:9–10, “There is no new thing under the sun.” How should this truth about the sameness of human history shape the way a believer understands progress, novelty, and the deeper needs of the human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In 1:9–10 Solomon declares, “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” He anticipates the objection: surely something is new? And he answers that even what looks new has already been, in some form, long ago. The fashions change; the human story does not.

We must read this carefully. Solomon is not denying technological or historical change; he is speaking of the deeper realities. Human nature does not change. The same pride, the same

greed, the same longing, the same death come back in every generation under new clothing. Our gadgets advance; our hearts repeat. This is why the wisdom of an ancient book still reads like this morning's headlines.

This guards us against the modern myth that progress will eventually solve the human condition. Every age believes its new tools and ideas will finally fix us, and every age dies still groaning under the same old curse. The brokenness Solomon names is not a software problem to be patched; it is a heart problem, and only God addresses the heart (Jeremiah 17:9; Ezekiel 36:26).

For the believer, this is strangely freeing. If there is nothing new under the sun, then the God who met His people in every past generation is the same God who meets us now. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). The sameness of the human story is matched by the unchanging faithfulness of God, and that is where our hope is anchored.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- "No new thing" as the constancy of human nature, not denial of change
- Progress cannot cure the heart's deepest problem
- Sin and longing repeat in every generation
- Only God transforms the human heart (Ezekiel 36:26)
- The unchanging faithfulness of God (Hebrews 13:8)
- Why ancient Scripture speaks to modern life (Romans 15:4)

Discussion Prompts

- What about human nature stays the same across every generation?
- Why does technological progress never fix the deepest human problem?
- How does the unchanging God give us hope in a repeating world?

Question 6

Student Question:

Verse 11 says the former generations and even those to come will not be remembered. How does being forgotten by the world strike you, and how does it change things to know that you are never forgotten by God (Malachi 3:16; Luke 12:6–7)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 11 adds a sobering note: "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after." Whole generations live, strive, and die, and within a few decades their names are largely forgotten. The crowds that filled ancient streets are gone, and most of us cannot name our own great-great-grandparents.

This is a hard mirror for a culture obsessed with leaving a legacy and being remembered. Solomon strips away the comfort that our striving will at least secure us a lasting memory among people. From the world's side, the memory fades. The monuments crumble, the achievements blur, and the next generation hurries on with its own concerns.

But here the larger witness of Scripture lifts our heads. We may be forgotten by the world, but we are never forgotten by God. The Lord keeps a book of remembrance for those who fear Him and think upon His name (Malachi 3:16). Jesus said that not even a sparrow is forgotten before God, and “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Luke 12:6–7). What the world forgets, God treasures.

This reframes the whole question of significance. We do not need to claw for a legacy that the world will lose anyway. Our labor is “not in vain in the Lord” because the Lord remembers it (1 Corinthians 15:58; Hebrews 6:10). The pastoral aim here is to move students from anxious self-memorializing to restful trust in the God who never forgets His own.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fading of human memory and earthly legacy
- The vanity of striving merely to be remembered by people
- God's book of remembrance for those who fear Him (Malachi 3:16)
- We are never forgotten by God (Luke 12:6–7)
- Significance grounded in God's memory, not the world's

Discussion Prompts

- How does it feel to know the world will likely forget your name?
- How does it change things to know God never forgets you?
- Where are you tempted to chase a legacy the world cannot keep?

Question 7

Student Question:

In 1:12–15 Solomon, with kingly resources, gives his heart “to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things,” yet calls it a “sore travail” and concludes “that which is crooked cannot be made straight.” What does this reveal about human wisdom apart from God, and about the brokenness of this present world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In 1:12–15 Solomon describes his great experiment. As king he “gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven.” No one was better positioned to find the answers: he had unmatched intellect, unlimited resources, and complete

freedom to investigate. Yet he calls it “this sore travail,” a grievous labor God has given the sons of men to be exercised with.

His honest finding is stark: “all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (1:14). The phrase “vexation of spirit” carries the sense of chasing the wind, grasping after something you can never catch. Then comes the proverb in verse 15: “That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.” Human wisdom, however vast, cannot fix what is fundamentally broken in this fallen world.

This is a vital doctrinal point. Solomon is exposing the limits of wisdom pursued on its own terms, apart from God, within the horizon of “under the sun.” Such wisdom can describe the crookedness of the world brilliantly, but it cannot straighten it. The world is bent by sin and the curse, and no amount of human analysis can un-bend it. Only the Maker can make crooked things straight.

And He does. What human wisdom cannot straighten, God in Christ is setting right. The gospel is the power of God to straighten crooked hearts and one day to make all things new (Revelation 21:5; Isaiah 40:4). Solomon's dead end is meant to be a signpost: stop trusting your own searching to fix what only God can heal, and look to the One who came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:10).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The limits of human wisdom apart from God
- “Vexation of spirit” as chasing the wind
- The world's crookedness is the result of sin and the curse
- Only God can straighten what is bent (Isaiah 40:4)
- Christ came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10)
- Wisdom that diagnoses but cannot cure

Discussion Prompts

- Why could even Solomon's wisdom not straighten what is crooked?
- What is the difference between describing a problem and healing it?
- How does God in Christ address the crookedness of this world?

Question 8

Student Question:

Solomon had every advantage and still came up empty searching on his own terms. Where have you been tempted to think that more information, more analysis, or more effort would finally straighten out what is crooked in your life, and what would it look like to bring that to God instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Solomon's experiment toward the student. He had every conceivable advantage, the sharpest mind, the deepest pockets, the widest experience, and still came up grasping the wind. If his searching on his own terms ended empty, we should pause before assuming that ours will end any differently.

Many of us live by a quiet creed: if I could just get more information, run the numbers one more time, read one more book, think it through more carefully, I could finally straighten out what is crooked in my life. There is nothing wrong with study and diligence; God commends them. But Solomon warns that human effort divorced from God hits a wall it cannot climb.

The honest believer learns to bring the crooked thing to God rather than endlessly analyzing it alone. James says that anyone lacking wisdom should “ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally” (James 1:5). Proverbs urges us to “trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5–6). The turn from self-reliant searching to God-dependent trust is the very pivot Ecclesiastes is driving toward.

The teacher should help students name a specific crooked place where they have been trusting their own straightening, a relationship, a habit, a worry, a decision, and consider what it would look like to lay it before God in prayer and obedience instead. This is not passivity; it is the active humility of bringing our limits to the limitless God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to trust analysis and effort to fix the heart
- The good of study versus self-reliant searching
- Asking God for wisdom (James 1:5)
- Leaning not on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5–6)
- Bringing our limits to the limitless God in prayer and obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you trusting more information or effort to straighten something only God can?
- What does it look like in practice to bring that to God instead?
- How is asking God for wisdom different from giving up?

Question 9

Student Question:

In 1:16–18 the Preacher says, “In much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” How do we hold this hard saying together with the rest of Scripture, which everywhere commends wisdom and the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10), and how does this drive us to Christ, “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; 2:9–10)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends on its hardest note. Solomon, who excelled “all they that have been before me in Jerusalem” in wisdom and knowledge, concludes, “For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow” (1:18). The more clearly he saw the world, the more its brokenness pained him. Wisdom is a lamp, and the more it shows you, the more of the world's sorrow it reveals.

We must hold this saying together with the rest of Scripture, which everywhere praises wisdom. Proverbs calls the fear of the Lord “the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10) and urges us to get wisdom above all our getting. So Solomon is not contradicting that; he is describing the cost of wisdom pursued “under the sun.” Wisdom that looks only at this fallen world will indeed multiply grief, because it sees the brokenness clearly without yet seeing the redemption. The sorrow is the ache of an honest mind in a cursed world.

This is precisely the ache the gospel answers. The wisdom of this world reaches its limit and weeps; the wisdom of God in Christ reaches further. Paul declares that “Christ crucified” is “the wisdom of God,” that God “made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). Solomon's wisdom could see that the world is crooked; the wisdom of God provides the One who came to straighten it.

So this heaviest doctrinal moment of the lesson is also its great turning point. The grief of wisdom under the sun is meant to drive us above the sun to Christ. Paul quotes the very things “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard” and adds, “But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). The sorrow of earthly wisdom is real, but it is not the end of the story for anyone who finds wisdom in Christ. This is wisdom literature given before Christ, and the New Testament shows where its honest ache finally finds its answer (Romans 15:4).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Why honest wisdom under the sun multiplies grief
- Holding 1:18 together with Proverbs' praise of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10)
- The fear of the Lord as the beginning of true wisdom
- Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30)
- What God reveals by His Spirit beyond earthly wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:9–10)
- Reading OT wisdom in light of Christ (Romans 15:4)
- Realism that drives to Christ, not to despair

Discussion Prompts

- Why would increasing knowledge increase sorrow in a fallen world?
- How does 1:18 fit with the rest of Scripture's praise of wisdom?
- How does Christ, the wisdom of God, answer the grief Solomon describes?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across Ecclesiastes 1:1–18 as a whole, Solomon has laid bare how empty life feels when it is measured only “under the sun.” Name one specific way this passage is stirring you to lift your eyes above the sun to Christ, and how He is reshaping what you are living for.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to gather up the whole chapter and respond personally. Solomon has walked us through the vapor of life, the unprofitable toil, the restless cycles, the unfillable sea, the sameness of history, the fading of memory, the limits of wisdom, and the grief of much knowledge, all measured “under the sun.” Taken together, the chapter is a sustained dismantling of every false place we look for rest.

But the whole point of the demolition is to clear the ground for the only foundation that holds. Ecclesiastes is not a counsel of despair; it is a long, honest road that ends at “Fear God, and keep his commandments” (12:13). The way up is to stop looking only under the sun and lift our eyes above it, to the God who made us and to Christ in whom alone our restless hearts find rest.

Paul gives the believer's posture: “Seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:1–2). That is the answer to Ecclesiastes 1 in a single sentence. The vapor of life under the sun becomes bearable, even joyful, when our true treasure is hid with Christ in God.

The teacher should press for something specific and personal here. Not a vague resolution to be more spiritual, but one concrete way this passage is reshaping what the student is living for: a pursuit to loosen their grip on, a fear to surrender, a place to turn their eyes upward. The goal is that students leave this lesson not heavier, but lighter, having handed their vapor-quick lives to the God who never forgets them and the Christ who satisfies the longing soul.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Ecclesiastes 1 as the dismantling of false resting places
- The book's aim: fear God, not despair (12:13–14)
- Seeking the things above where Christ is (Colossians 3:1–2)
- Lifting our eyes above the sun to Christ
- Naming one concrete way the heart is being reshaped
- Resting our short, vapor-quick lives in God

Discussion Prompts

- Which image from chapter 1 most exposed where your own heart has been looking for rest?
- What is one specific pursuit Christ is calling you to hold more loosely?
- How can you practically “seek the things above” this week?