

The Book of Ecclesiastes

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

1:1-18

Picture an old king at the end of a long, glittering life. He has built houses and planted vineyards, gathered silver and gold, heard the songs of the best singers in the land, and tasted every pleasure a crown could buy. And now, with the evening coming on, he sits down to tell you the truth about all of it. He does not begin with a boast. He begins with a sigh. "Vanity of vanities," he says, "all is vanity." The word he uses is the picture of your breath on a cold morning, here for a second and then gone. That is how he has come to see the whole frantic business of living "under the sun." And if a man who had everything ends up saying that, we had better lean in and listen.

We know this feeling, even if we have never worn a crown. You finally get the promotion you chased for years, and within a month it feels ordinary. You clean the whole house on Saturday, and by Wednesday it looks as if you never touched it. The sun comes up, the sun goes down, then it hurries back to do it all over again. The rivers run and run into the sea, and somehow the sea is never full. Solomon looks at the great wheel of the world turning and turning, and he notices something that quietly unsettles him: it is all motion, but it never seems to arrive. The river runs, but it does not rest. And our hearts, he is hinting, are a little like that too.

Now do not mistake this for a man who has given up on God. This is not the bitter shrug of someone who believes in nothing. The Preacher is doing something far more honest and far more useful. He is taking life exactly as it appears when you look at it only from down here, only on this side of eternity, only "under the sun," and he is refusing to pretend. He will not hand you a cheap answer. He even tells you that wisdom itself comes with a sting, that "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." The more clearly you see the world, the more its brokenness aches. But hold on, because this hard honesty is going somewhere. It is meant to walk you off the dead ends until you finally look up.

So here is the question this old king sets in front of you this week, and it is a question for a Monday morning as much as for a Sunday class. What are you running after under the sun, and have you stopped to ask whether it can ever actually fill you? The river of your days is running fast. The same chores, the same commute, the same striving that felt so urgent last year. Solomon is not trying to steal your joy. He is trying to keep you from spending your one short, vapor-quick life chasing things that were never built to satisfy a soul made for God. Read his honest words slowly, and let them turn your face upward, where the only lasting answers are found.

Group Discussion: Solomon, a man who had wealth, wisdom, and pleasure beyond any of us, concludes that life "under the sun" is like a vapor. Why do you think God preserved such an

unflinchingly honest book in Scripture, and what good can this kind of holy realism do for believers today?

Personal Reflection: Think honestly about the thing you have been chasing hardest in this season of your life. If you caught it tomorrow, would it truly satisfy your soul, or would it leave you, like Solomon, saying “vanity”? What is that telling you about where your heart is set?

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1–18

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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)?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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)?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Romans 8:18–25, where creation itself groans in futility, subjected to vanity yet waiting in hope for redemption; Psalm 90:1–12, Moses on the brevity of life and the prayer to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, where Christ crucified is revealed as the wisdom and power of God that puts human wisdom to shame; Colossians 3:1–4, the call to seek the things above, where Christ is, rather than the things on the earth; Ecclesiastes 12:13–14, the Preacher's own conclusion to fear God and keep His commandments

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