

Ecclesiastes 1-2 • Under the Sun

Introduction

During the course of this study you will be reminded several times that it's important to frequently re-visit the context of Ecclesiastes in order to properly understand and apply what is being taught here. The key, repeated phrase throughout is "under the sun", an expressive literary way of stating that Solomon is purposely limiting the discussion to what is happening here on earth, that which takes place between our birth and death. Ecclesiastes is the biblical answer to the world's voluminous quest to answer the question, "Why are we here? What is our purpose?" It's very important to always keep in mind that all of Solomon's answers are provided within the context of **GOD'S** wisdom – the way God views and ordains things, and not according to the world's definition of "wisdom". Whether people accept it or not, this is the **biblical** answer.

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

²"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

³What advantage does man have in all his work

Which he does under the sun?

⁴A generation goes and a generation comes,

But the earth remains forever.

⁵Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there again.

⁶Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns.

⁷All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full.

To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again.

⁸All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell it.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

⁹That 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.

¹⁰Is there anything of which one might say,

"See this, it is new"?

Already it has existed for ages Which were before us.

¹¹There 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.

[Read 1:1-11]

Q: What exactly is the biblical meaning of "vanity"?

A: Since the modern-day use of this word is most often along the lines of an inflated pride in one's self or appearance or a kind of inflated superiority complex, it's important to note that the original meaning of "vanity" in the English language is "something empty or valueless". This is why some translations render v.2 as "Futility of futilities". The Hebrew word could literally be translated as "vapor" or "breath". It conveys the biblical idea of something that is unsubstantial, worthless, and ultimately unprofitable.

Observation: This mechanism ("Vanity of vanities") is a very strong device in Hebrew language and culture where the repetition of the word serves to increase the force of the overall meaning. It's similar to "holy of holies" (Ex. 26:13) and "servant of servants". (Gen. 9:25)

Q: How do we know that the theme of Ecclesiastes is limited to things on earth instead of things of heaven?

A: This is the primary meaning of the repeated phrase "under the sun". To reinforce this, v.3-7 open up with descriptions of earthly phenomena: the earth itself, the rising and setting sun, the blowing wind, the water cycle of the rivers and sea.

Q: What is likened to all these earthly cycles?

A: Every "generation" past, present, and future. In other words, all these physical futilities represent mankind's futilities – they all come back to their original starting point. But they also serve to provide the contrast that although each generation of mankind comes and goes, the issues remain exactly the same.

Q: What exactly are mankind's futilities?

A: According to v.8-11 it's the delusion that the things they experience in their own lifetime are new, when in fact they are merely the exact same things every generation which came before or is to come experience.

Point: Ever notice how there's always someone trying to make the case that "things are different" today? While it's true that mankind experiences technological advancements, why is it true that his spiritual nature and behavior have not?

Application: Every single false doctrine and false spiritual movement in the world today, although repackaged and marketed as something "new", is actually the same thing Satan has tried to sell to every generation. This especially

includes those claiming to have a “new” Word from God or empowered to do a “new” work or miracle. True believers can immediately identify spiritual deception by its claim to be something “new”. Every generation of human born on earth must deal with and answer the exact same questions even though they now drive cars instead of ride donkeys.

¹²I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. ¹⁴I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. ¹⁵What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶I said to myself, “Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. ¹⁸Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.

[Read 1:12-18]

Q: Who is the author of Ecclesiastes and what is his approach to resolving the issues?

A: The author is King Solomon and he is publishing the results of what he found as a result of applying the gift of wisdom bestowed on him by God. Ultimately he is applying the world’s greatest mind in order to understand the nature of the world itself.

Q: How would you characterize Solomon’s search as portrayed in this section?

A: It is the intellectual search.

Q: What are the three categories by which Solomon determined to understand all earthly things?

A: According to v.17 he desired to intellectually understand “wisdom”, “madness”, and “folly”.

Q: How do these terms compare and contrast to each other?

1. **“Wisdom”** – the ability to correctly judge and follow the best course of action based on the application of God’s Word. The first principle of biblical wisdom is that a person humbles their self before God in reverence and worship, completely obedient to His commands.
2. **“Madness”** – the end result of the complete rejection of God’s Word and ways, it is an ungovernable passion of violence against the things of God characterized by a reckless state of mind, blind rage, a depraved temper, or outright insane behavior.
3. **“Folly”** – the process of rejecting God’s Word and ways in favor of an alternative. It’s a process by which one first closes their mind to God, then evolves into a “scoffer” or outward critic of the things of God, and ultimately into an unredeemable backslider. The implication is that at one time they were presented with and acknowledged God’s Truth, but consciously chose to reject it. They are not “ignorant” but “rebellious”.

Point: Solomon is explaining that he explored the solutions to these answers not only as a true believer empowered with God’s wisdom, but in the form of each varying degree of a person rejecting God’s Word and ways from the mild backslider to the hardcore sinner.

Q: Why do you suppose Solomon keeps repeating that the results are akin to “striving after wind”?

A: It’s a very strong reinforcement in the Hebrew language of the core meaning of “vanity”, which is “vapor” or “breath”. A loose rendering might be, “It’s like trying to catch a vapor in a strong wind”.

Q: Why does Solomon summarize this section by basically stating that the acquisition of knowledge is never fully satisfying?

A: Can you name a single area of human knowledge that is complete? No matter the discipline, however far scientists or scholars increase the

boundaries of what is known on a subject, it always creates more questions than answers. Are there more questions in the area of Astronomy today or less? Every earthly answer actually births multiplied new questions in its place.

Q: What is significant to keep in mind about Solomon's basic approach?

A: In v.13 it is predicated on the action, "*I set my mind*". Ultimately everything boils down not to a test of knowledge (the mind), but faith (the heart). This is why the disciplines of science, philosophy, and the humanities always and ultimately present more questions than they can ever answer because they universally reject faith.

Application: *One of the most important lessons we should be getting from Ecclesiastes is that knowing God's Word is no substitute for putting it into practice.*

[Read 2:1-3]

¹I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. ²I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" ³I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

Q: How would you characterize this search by Solomon?

A: It is the hedonistic search.

Q: Did Solomon just go wild and unrestrained here?

A: It's important to note the context by which he undertook these pleasures, for according to v.3 he provides the caveat, "*while my mind was guiding me wisely*". In other words, he is judging all pleasure within the context of God's wisdom, by the measure of God's Word and ways. It's not the world's standards he is employing, but God's.

Q: Why might it be significant that one of the devices Solomon used was wine?

A: Under these conditions he is not speaking about drunken abandonment, but what we might call "good living, good eating and drinking" or enjoying the finer things in life.

Application: *Yes, Satan completely and overtly enslaves some through the worst kind of addictions, but then there is his more subtle deception of using the things of this world "moderately", even though in doing so they equally lead away from the Word and ways of God as effectively as full-on addiction.*

[Read 2:4-11]

⁴I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; ⁵I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; ⁶I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. ⁸Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.

⁹Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.

Q: How would you characterize this third search by Solomon?

A: The search through personal works.

Q: Into what two categories could this list of works be sorted?

A: Things contributing to material wealth and things contributing to personal pleasure.

Q: What is the important distinction Solomon makes in v.10 as the justification for the personal pleasures he indulged in?

A: "*My heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor*".

Observation: *As the basis for this teaching, Solomon did not simply abandon everything for every imaginable physical pleasure, but engaging in what we might term as reaping the benefits of his hard work, of earning the right to enjoy what he has worked for. This is not the same as someone who abandons every*

¹⁰All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. ¹¹Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

restraint and rule to party full-tilt uncontrollably with no regard for the consequences.

Q: What was Solomon's conclusion as to what all his exceedingly great works delivered in this life?

A: "There was no profit under the sun". (v.11)

Application: First, it's important to note for whom all these works were undertaken: "for myself". Conspicuously absent is any mention of works done for others. (This is important in order to keep things in context.) Secondly, how would you assess Solomon's findings in the light of this old adage: "Christians don't do works to **GET** saved, they do good works because they **ARE** saved"?

Summary to This Point:

Solomon has undertaken three types of searches in order to understand the point of one's labors in this life:

- The Intellectual Search
- The Hedonistic Search
- The Personal Works Search

You might say these typify a search of the mind ("intellectual"), heart ("hedonistic") and soul {"works") within the scope of life between birth and death on planet earth within the overall context of God's wisdom.

¹²So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what will the man do who will come after the king except what has already been done? ¹³And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. ¹⁴The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. ¹⁵Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." ¹⁶For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! ¹⁷So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

[Read 2:12-17]

Q: Following three searches by Solomon, he now presents three realizations he has come to. How would you characterize this first realization?

A: The same fate in this life awaits everyone, wise and fool alike – death followed by fading from the memory of the living.

Q: How would you characterize the central issue he is struggling with here?

A: It's the question, "What is the lasting results of my time on earth?" This is compounded by his observation that the quality of one's labors cannot change the inevitable outcome that death will end every life alike.

Q: This has been pointed out previously, but is important to keep in mind throughout Ecclesiastes: What is the very LIMITED context Solomon is using?

A: "Under the sun". (v.17) He is speaking **STRICTLY** within the limits of our time on earth and what happens **WHILE** we're pursuing the things of this life.

Application: If the same fate awaits everyone in the course of this life, then the logical inference is that there has to be something greater at work than just the pursuits of this life.

[Read 2:18-23]

¹⁸Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely

Q: How would you characterize Solomon's second realization?

A: The benefits of this life's works are inherited by those who never had to work for them.

under the sun. This too is vanity.
²⁰Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. ²¹When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. ²²For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

²⁴There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. ²⁵For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? ²⁶For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

Q: Solomon never directly uses the term, but what quality is it that is missing from the endeavors of this life? What is never attainable either through the accomplishment of personal works or passing on their legacy to another?

A: Peace. This is what is inferred by the repeated use of the word "striving" and assigning to it the end result of futility.

Point: *There is no earthly peace in this present life due to the constant striving for personal results or the weight of worries of what will happen to those labors when passed on to the next generation.*

Application: *What do you expect to get from your life's work, both on a personal/family level and spiritually pertaining to church and ministry? How do Solomon's teachings relate to Christ's such as the Parable of the Talents or Minas?*

[Read 2:24-26]

Q: How would you characterize Solomon's third realization?

A: Whatever pleasant benefits are experienced in this life for the labors of this life, they are a blessing from God to be enjoyed in this life..

Q: Is Solomon saying that feeling good about doing God's will is "vanity and striving after wind"?

A: No, this final sentence is connected to "the sinner". As prefaced at the beginning of this section, enjoyment of this life is "from the hand of God" for the faithful Believer, but all life's labors are "striving after wind" for the sinner.

Q: Previously Solomon compared the wise to the fool and the mad. How does he take this a step further to place the entire discussion in the proper spiritual context?

A: He ultimately compares and contrasts the Believer to the sinner. He ultimately ties everything back to whether or not, in the course and boundaries of this present life, one chooses God's Word and ways over the world's.

Application: *For Believer's it's not whether or not material success provides good times in this life, but whether or not the things they have achieved were accomplished in accordance with God's Word and ways. Wealth is not a sign of God's approval in and of itself – this does not provide comfort in this life. For the Believer it is whatever has been attained while adhering exclusively to His Word and ways.*

Overall Application

It's extremely important to keep Ecclesiastes in the proper context. The Preacher is not illuminating what is taking place in the heavenly places but limiting the discussion to what occurs "under the sun" – in the course of this life.

- *How is God speaking to you about how to be satisfied in this present life?*
- *How might the areas of contention fit in with Solomon's observations?*
- *How do we bring our views and feelings about our labors in this life into alignment with God's?*

Bonus Application

The three search categories, when examined from a Believer's point of view, can all be applied to the pursuit of false teaching/false movements within the Church. What others can be added to those listed here?

- **Intellectual**: *These are characterized as something devoted so exclusively to truth, the practitioner is devoid of biblical love. This is evident in examples such as hyper-Calvinism, extreme "discernment" ministries, and those who view everything through the prism of prophecy. When truth is allowed to trump love, the resulting quest for righteousness has no room for love.*
- **Hedonistic**: *These are characterized as something devoted to making one feel good emotionally about themselves, often to the exclusion both of biblical truth or love. Such examples are Faith-Prosperity, Signs and Wonders, the Emergent Church, etc.*
- **Personal Works**: *The most obvious examples are the various Purpose Driven initiatives and the greater Church Growth Movement from which they are derived. Biblical faith is abandoned in favor of assessing all things by works.*