



Ecclesiastes - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Solomon looked back over all the wealth he had acquired, his life's accomplishments and all his possessions. And to him it all seemed meaningless. Even though he had everything, he was still unfulfilled and dissatisfied. He believed that serving God was the most important option. In this chapter, he separates wisdom into two categories:

1. Human knowledge, reasoning, or philosophy.
2. The wisdom that can only come from God.

I Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26 - First Catalogue of vanities

The Teacher proceeds to give specific examples to prove his thesis that all is vanity.

I.a Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 - Reflections of a Royal Philosopher

Although he does not name himself specifically it is clear that the Teacher is King Solomon. The endless repetition of natural seasons and cycles never produces anything new (v.9) and thus appears to be without direction or purpose.

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

Ecclesiastes 1:1

The words of the Teacher. The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most unusual and perhaps most difficult to understand books of the Bible. It has a spirit of hopeless despair; it has no praise or peace; it seems to promote questionable conduct. Yet these words of the Teacher reveal the futility and foolishness of a life lived without an eternal perspective. The question in Ecclesiastes is not about the existence of God; the author is no atheist, and God is always there. The question is

whether or not God matters. The answer to that question is vitally connected to a responsibility to God that goes beyond this earthly life.

In the search for this answer, the Teacher searched the depths of human experience, including despair. He thoroughly examined the emptiness and futility of life lived without eternity before coming to the conclusion of the necessity of eternity. Derek Kidner commented, “We face the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun. It is then that we can hear, as the good news which it is, that everything matters - ‘for God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.’”

The Hebrew word for Teacher is *qoheleth* and is often translated as Preacher. The idea is of someone who might gather, lead, or speak to a group of people - a congregation. Kidner added, “The word is connected with the Hebrew for assembling, and its form suggests some kind of office-bearer. The many attempts at translating this title include: ‘Ecclesiastes’, ‘The Preacher’, ‘The Speaker’, ‘The President’, ‘The Spokesman’, ‘The Philosopher’. We might almost add, ‘The Professor’!”

The son of David. This identifies the Teacher as David’s son, Solomon: <<*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel*>> (Proverbs 1:1). Some believe that another wrote it in Solomon’s name, but there is no compelling reason to say that anyone other than Solomon wrote it. Kidner concurred, “There will come another enigmatic note in verse 16, with its claim to a wisdom ‘surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me’. This rules out any successor to the matchless Solomon.”

King in Jerusalem. From his royal standing, Solomon had the wisdom, freedom, resources, and standing to write this work. In a sense, only Solomon could write this book. He had both the wisdom and the resources to work through these problems. Kidner observed, “With *Qoheleth* we put on the mantle of a Solomon, that most brilliant and least limited of men, to set out on the search. With every gift and power at our command, it would be strange if we should come back empty-handed.”

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

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! This extremely important thematic word (Hebrew *hebel*, literally ‘vapour,’ is taken figuratively as ‘vanity’) occurs frequently throughout the book; at this early point, however, the Teacher

leaves it unexplained. It is only as the book progresses that its meaning becomes clear.

To strengthen his point, the Teacher judged life to be the ultimate vanity, the vanity of vanities. This Hebrew phrasing is used to express intensity or the ultimate of something, as in the phrase 'holy of holies'. This phrase or something quite like it will be used about 30 times in this short book. It is one of the major themes of Ecclesiastes.

All is vanity. To further strengthen the point, Solomon noted not only that life is vanity, but that all is vanity. It seemed that every part of life suffered from this emptiness. It can be seen from the first two verses that Solomon wrote this from a certain perspective, a perspective that through the book he will expose as inadequate and wrong. Almost all of Ecclesiastes is written from this perspective, through the eyes of a man who thinks and lives as if God does not matter. Therefore, Ecclesiastes is filled with what might be called 'true lies' or 'guiding fiction'. Given the perspective 'God does not matter,' it is true that all is vanity. Since that perspective is wrong, it is not true that all is vanity. Yet Solomon makes the reader think through this wrong perspective thoroughly throughout Ecclesiastes. Solomon thinks through this perspective, but he was not the first or the last to see life this way: <<*You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Selah. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather*>> (Psalm 39:5-6), until it is seen in the right context: <<*for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*>> (Romans 8:20-21). Many people today judge life to be equally futile.

³ What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:3

What do people gain from all the toil. Using the language from the world of business, the Teacher asked a worthy question. He knew that life was filled with labour - but what is it worth? What does it profit? Jesus expressed a similar thought: <<*For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*>> (Mark 8:36). This repeated question is born out of the Teacher's realisation that 'all is vanity': if life frequently makes no sense and pleasures and achievements are fleeting, is there any significance to human existence?

The phrase under the sun does not indicate a secular point of view, as is often claimed (the Teacher's frequent references to God exclude such an interpretation)

but rather refers to the world and to mankind in their current fallen state, much like NT expressions such as ‘this age’ or ‘this present age.’

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains for ever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south,
and goes round to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.

Ecclesiastes 1:4-7

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever.
Using several examples, the Teacher observes that nothing seems to change very much in the seemingly unending cycle of nature.

The sun rises and the sun goes down, the wind blows to the south, streams run to the sea. From what Solomon could observe under the sun, these unchanging cycles expressed the unchanging monotony of life, leading to its vanity and meaninglessness: <<*See, these are their happy ways, and out of the earth still others will spring*>> (Job 8:19).

⁸ All things are wearisome;
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

- 10 Is there a thing of which it is said,
‘See, this is new’?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
- 11 The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance
of people yet to come
by those who come after them.

Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

All things are wearisome; more than one can express. Solomon then observed that the meaninglessness of life was not only reflected in nature. This frustration is also evident in human effort and endeavour. Despite all man’s enterprise, seeing and hearing, he is still not satisfied. Adam Clarke commented, “It is impossible to calculate how much anxiety, pain, labour, and fatigue are necessary in order to carry on the common operations of life. But an endless desire of gain, and an endless curiosity to witness a variety of results, cause men to labour on.”

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Despite all man’s work and progress, life seems monotonously the same. Things that seem new get old very quickly because of familiarity and the quest to always move on, so it could be said ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’ The more things change, the more they stay the same. There is a new way that is the same as the old way. Kidner concluded, “In their new guise the old ways go on. As a race, we never learn.”

There may be nothing new under the sun; but thankfully the followers of Jesus - those born again by God’s Spirit - do not live under the sun in that sense. Their life is filled with new things:

- A new name: <<*The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give*>> (Isaiah 62:2), and: <<*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it*>> (Revelation 2:17).
- A new community: <<*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us*>> (Ephesians 2:14).

- A new help from angels: *<<For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways>>* (Psalm 91:11).
- A new commandment: *<<I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another>>* (John 13:34).
- A new covenant: *<<But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people>>* (Jeremiah 31:33), and: *<<Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'>>* (Matthew 26:27-28).
- A new and living way to heaven: *<<Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)>>* (Hebrews 10:19-20).
- A new purity: *<<Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed>>* (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- A new nature: *<<You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness>>* (Ephesians 4:22-24).
- A new creation in Jesus Christ: *<<So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!>>* (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- All things become new as seen in 2 Corinthians 5:17 above and in: *<<And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true'>>* (Revelation 21:5).

The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come. The futility of life seems to extend in both directions, both back into the past and on into the future. Man works hard, yet it never seems to make a lasting difference and all is simply forgotten. As the generations come and go, there are very few people who make any significant impact on the course of world history; the majority of the human race lives and dies in obscurity. The seemingly never-ending march of human generations thus appears to be as purposeless as the repetitive cycles of the natural world: *<<Surely God is great, and we do not know him; the number of his years is unsearchable. For he draws up the drops of water; he distils his mist in rain, which the skies pour down and drop upon mortals abundantly. Can*

anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion?>> (Job 36:26-29).

I.b Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 - The Futility of Seeking Wisdom

The Teacher states his basic quest (namely, to understand all of reality) and summarises its results.

¹² I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³ applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴ I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem. Solomon was internationally famous for his great wisdom. This is confirmed in the account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba: <<*So she said to the king, 'The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments and of your wisdom, but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes saw it. Not even half of the greatness of your wisdom had been told to me; you far surpass the report that I had heard'*>> (2 Chronicles 9:5-6). If the answers to the seeming emptiness of life could be found by wisdom, Solomon was the one to find them. Solomon's great wisdom was a gift of God. When God offered him whatever he pleased, he asked for wisdom, especially the wisdom to lead the people of God; refer to 1 Kings 3:5-28. Therefore God made Solomon so wise that he wrote thousands of proverbs, and he was considered to be wiser than all the men of his day; refer to 1 Kings 4:29-34.

Applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. With the unique ability to make such a search, Solomon looked for the answers in wisdom - by which he meant human wisdom that excluded answers in the light of eternity. This is the wisdom of those who give guidance to a better life in the here-and-now; how to live a healthier, happier, more prosperous life. This wisdom certainly has value, and many lives would be better for following it. Yet if it excludes a true appreciation of eternity and human responsibilities in the world to come, this wisdom has no true answer to the meaninglessness of life. It only shows people how to live their meaningless lives better.

In other places in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is thought of as a blessing - as it is; even wisdom that excludes eternity; refer to Ecclesiastes 7:11-12 and 7:19. Yet this kind of 'under the sun' wisdom cannot shed light upon the problem of the vanity and meaninglessness of life.

The Teacher perceives that in this world God has given an unhappy business, i.e. a troubling or burdensome task, to the children of humankind. The same Hebrew phrase occurs in Ecclesiastes 4:8 and 5:14, (the latter describes it as ‘a bad venture’), where it refers to the burdens and trials experienced by those who live under heaven (this phrase is interchangeable with the expression under the sun). For some inscrutable reason, God ordains that mankind should endure painful experiences in this present fallen order.

The Teacher examined everything under the sun, just as he set out to do (v.13). However, he is unable to comprehend it all and draws the conclusion that everything is vanity and chasing after wind. This latter expression is almost always directly linked with the word for vanity.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Ecclesiastes 1:15

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. The Teacher’s initial search for the answers in wisdom (under the sun) brought him only despair: <<*Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?*>> (Ecclesiastes 7:13). Kidner commented, “With his usual devastating candour *Qoheleth* is quick to tell us the worst. The search has come to nothing.”

Crooked is to be understood in the sense of ‘inscrutable,’ rather than in an ethical sense of ‘wicked’ or ‘corrupt.’ There will always be aspects of life in a fallen world that remain mysterious because God has chosen not to reveal the answers to all of mankind’s questions.

¹⁶ I said to myself, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.’ ¹⁷ And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-17

I said to myself is also translated as ‘I communed with my heart.’ This approach is natural for anyone who looks for the answers under the sun, apart from an eternal perspective. They look inward for wisdom and answers, instead of to the God who rules eternity.

I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me. If anyone possessed the wisdom to comprehend the meaning of life, it was the Teacher.

As part of his quest to know wisdom, the Teacher also seeks to comprehend madness and folly. It is not that he seriously considers these to be viable alternatives to the path of wisdom. Rather, his intent is to come to a better understanding of wisdom by simultaneously examining wisdom's opposite, i.e. foolishness. This is confirmed by the Lord's knowledge of good and evil: <<*Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever'*>> (Genesis 3:22); refer also to Genesis 2:9 and 2:17. The repeated and intensified search for wisdom brought no ultimate meaning. The solution was not to think harder and search better; it was all chasing after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow. The more the Teacher understood life under the sun, the greater his despair. The more he learned, the more he realised what he did not know. The more he knew, the more he knew life's sorrows: <<*For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity*>> (Ecclesiastes 2:23), <<*Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh*>> (Ecclesiastes 12:12), and: <<*You said, 'Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest'*>> (Jeremiah 45:3).

Wisdom is a mixed blessing: to gain wisdom and understanding is to gain a clearer view of the tragedies of life in a world marred by sin.