

Chapter 1

Vanity and Futility

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1).

Though not specifically named, the author of Ecclesiastes is clearly Solomon. The structure of this verse is similar to that in Proverbs 1:1 – *“The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel.”* Solomon is the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. In identifying himself as the Preacher, he makes it clear that these instructions are being taught to us and that they are intended for our learning. This is not a personal diary that was found which the author never intended for the contents in it to be shared with others in their original form. Solomon clearly indicates that he expects us to read his words and learn from them.

All is Vanity

Read: Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

The Preacher sets forth the topic to be discussed: the futility and insignificance of matters pertaining to this life. He repeats the phrase, *“vanity of vanities”* (1:2) for emphasis.

Solomon uses a very different tone than he did in his writings in Proverbs: *“In all labor there is profit”* (Proverbs 14:23). Is the wise man contradicting himself? No, he is simply writing from a different perspective (1:3). He does not say here that there is no profit in labor. Rather, he asks what can be produced in our labor that has any true, lasting value. His perspective here is in regard to matters *“under the sun.”* This is important. Nowhere does Solomon imply that our eternal existence is futile, only the secular pursuits of our earthly existence.

Our lives here *under the sun* are temporary. The earth will remain as long as God sees fit to allow it to remain, but our years are insignificant in comparison (1:4). Time, which is marked by the rising and setting of the sun, continues to move (1:5). It cannot be stopped or slowed down by man any more than one can stop or slow down the rotation of the earth.

Solomon then discusses how *“the wind continues swirling along...on its circular courses”* (1:6). Wind is one of the natural elements in weather. It has direction and freedom. Yet it ultimately follows the same circuit. The water on the earth also

follows a cycle that is similarly perpetual (1:7). The great volume of water that flows from the rivers into the oceans will never fill them up. This is an observation that harmonizes with the scientifically understood process of rainfall and evaporation: the water that runs through the rivers to the oceans will find itself back in the rivers again through the natural process which God has ordained. The water we have now is the same water which existed at the beginning. It continues to cycle through the system which God designed.

All that is done *under the sun* requires effort (1:8). Regardless of how much effort we exert or how weary we become, there will always be more to see and hear. The natural curiosity of mankind to see and hear new things will never be quenched.

Solomon then explains that “*there is nothing new under the sun*” (1:9). This is sort of a conclusion to the previous verses. There is a pattern to life. History repeats itself. Natural laws which God ordained in the beginning remain in place. Mankind generally follows the same habits from generation to generation. Yet man is always looking for new and exciting things (1:10). While we may discover things that are new to our consciousness, our experience is very limited. We have no cause for arrogance on account of some “new” discovery we may have made.

The wise man then reminds us of a harsh reality: most people of the past have been forgotten, no matter what they did or how important they, or others, thought they were (1:11). The same will be true for us, our children, our children’s children, and so on. If our goal in life is to be remembered after we depart, we have a futile goal.

The Futility of Wisdom

Read: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Solomon was king over God’s people during a time of great prosperity and peace (1:12). His peculiar circumstances allowed him to experiment and experience much of life, far more than any of us are able to do. If satisfaction and purpose could be found in this life, Solomon was in the best possible position to find it.

Solomon was not merely curious about the purpose and meaning of life as most people are – he diligently sought out the answers (1:13). This laborious task has been given by God to the sons of men in two ways. First, He has instilled in man a curiosity to discover that which is unknown. Second, He has not revealed

everything to man. Therefore, He has left us with unanswered questions, and by our curiosity, has given us the motivation to keep searching.

Solomon's unique situation gave him the opportunity to experience much of life, so much so that he could say he had seen "*all the works that are done under the sun*" and determined that "*all is vanity and striving after wind*" (1:14). We are again reminded of the scope of this book: things that are done "*under the sun*" – not heavenly things, but earthly things; not spiritual things, but temporal. The pursuit of these things is vanity and striving after wind. Making an analogy to wind is helpful, as it easily illustrates the futility of the matters that pertain to this life. Wind cannot be restrained or controlled – that is out of our hands. Similarly, much of life is out of our control as well.

This world is not perfect. There are things in life that are crooked and other things that are *wanting or lacking* (1:15). Solomon in all his investigations could see the inequity, injustice, suffering, and difficulties of life. But though he could recognize them, they could not be *straightened or numbered* (brought to completeness). Man is incapable of reforming this world into some sort of utopian paradise, despite having the best of intentions. It will always be lacking.

Solomon recognized the great wisdom he had in comparison with those who came before him (1:16). This is not an arrogant statement, for God had blessed him with this great wisdom (1 Kings 3:12). There was none who could rival him in regard to wisdom or knowledge. Furthermore, he was not just given wisdom, he desired wisdom and set his mind to acquire it (1:17). He also says he experienced *madness* and *folly*. No matter what direction he took, he discovered that there was no real fulfillment or satisfaction to be found in this life.

He then explained that "*increasing knowledge results in increasing pain*" (1:18). As one grows in wisdom, the truths that Solomon writes about become more clear, creating a stronger awareness of the futility of life (1:18). As one grows in knowledge, he becomes more aware of those things which cannot be discovered. Focusing on these things, without remembering God, will only result in grief and sorrow.

Questions on Chapter 1

1. What is suggested by Solomon identifying himself as “*the Preacher*” (1:1)?
2. Compare Ecclesiastes 1:3 with Proverbs 14:23. Is the wise man contradicting himself? Explain.
3. Explain the phrase, “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (1:9).
4. How did Solomon’s position help him to be able to search for purpose in life (1:12)?
5. What does the phrase “*under the sun*” indicate about the scope of the book of Ecclesiastes?
6. How was Solomon able to say that he had “*increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me*” (1:16)?
7. How does increasing wisdom increase result in increasing grief/pain (1:18)?

Chapter 2

Pleasures, Possessions, Wisdom, and Labor

The Futility of Pleasures and Possessions

Read: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

After finding no lasting fulfillment in the sober pursuit of wisdom, Solomon moves to the light-hearted realm of pleasure and the care-free enjoyment of life (2:1). It seems that this is the natural progression for many men who search for purpose and satisfaction in life. When the thoughtful, diligent quest to increase in wisdom and knowledge leaves one lacking, many turn to these types of pursuits. Yet Solomon found that laughter, pleasure, and enjoyment were not only futile; but for one to be wholly given to these things was foolishness (2:1-2).

Solomon then turned to alcohol (2:3). But despite the already depressing tone of this book, he did not turn to the destructive abuse of alcohol like so many do. Rather, he did what some do today (or attempt to do): he used alcohol (*wine*) to cheer himself and to get his mind off of his troubles. Yet he limited his use of alcohol such that he could still follow after wisdom. Not only do the Scriptures warn us against the casual use of alcohol (cf. Proverbs 23:31; 1 Peter 4:3), but Solomon testifies here of the fact that alcohol cannot solve any of our problems. It only provides a temporary distraction. It delays the necessary task of confronting our problems and dealing with difficult questions. If one seeks to discover “*what good there is for the sons of men to do*,” the answer will not be found in wine or any other similar drink. Finding the answers and purpose for life will only be delayed by such use of alcohol.

He then says he “*enlarged [his] works*,” which means he increased the size or number of his houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, ponds, and trees (2:4-6). Man often judges his own sense of worth based upon what he has made or what he possesses. Solomon had far more in this regard than most men who have ever lived. Yet such things could not bring lasting satisfaction. Part of Solomon's problem was that his pursuits were self-centered (“*for myself*”). As he explains later, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the blessings one has in life (5:18-19). But when one's entire focus is on self, he will never be complete.

After this he acquired slaves and possessed large flocks and herds, even larger than those who came before him (2:7). The number of one's servants and the size of one's flocks were other ways to judge the wealth and success of an individual. Just as he had with wisdom (1:16), Solomon had exceeded those who preceded him in Jerusalem.

Solomon accumulated riches as well (2:8). As the king he had authority to collect taxes and treasure from other kings and provinces. He had more wealth than we could dream of having here. Often we are tempted to say that we would be satisfied if we just had "more," yet Solomon was not satisfied with the greatest wealth one could hope to obtain. He also took pleasure in music, but this was nothing more than a distraction. He had "*seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines*" (1 Kings 11:3), yet these did not bring satisfaction.

Solomon was great in the sense that he possessed more than all who came before him. Despite his great wealth, he did not forget or forfeit the wisdom he had gained (2:9).

Whatever Solomon saw that he wanted, he was able to take possession of it and did so (2:10). Whatever he desired in his heart, he obtained for himself. In accumulating these possessions, Solomon says his heart was *pleased*. There was a degree of satisfaction, even though it would not last. This is what fools people: the temporary satisfaction that comes from the pursuits of this life. Many will mistake this *temporary* satisfaction for *real* satisfaction. Yet at some point, the realization will come that these things are vain and futile. But while one focuses on the here and now, he can, for a time, rejoice in obtaining what he desires. The wise man then says that these things – the temporary pleasures and benefits that exist *under the sun* – are the rewards for his labor.

After all of this, the wise man realized that "*all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun*" (2:11). Despite the pleasure and joy that could be obtained from the material things of this life, this is where one always finds oneself: realizing that such pursuits are vain and striving after the wind. Earlier, Solomon mentioned the "*circular courses*" of the wind (1:6). Despite its movement and appearance of freedom, the wind would ultimately accomplish nothing. So it is with all of our efforts and labor in this life. Anything accomplished *under the sun*, in the end, will get us no further than where we started.

Wisdom and Folly

Read: Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

After failing to find satisfaction in the pursuit of pleasures and possessions, the wise man turns back to wisdom, madness, and folly (2:12). He discussed these things in the previous chapter and concluded: “*This also is striving after wind*” (1:17). The previous discussion focused on the futility of wisdom (1:16-18). Here, he considers the future of the wise man compared with that of the fool. The second phrase of this verse reminds us of what he observed earlier: “*That 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*” (1:9). Whoever would replace him as king would not be able to do any more than what Solomon had done.

Solomon then says, “*And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness*” (2:13). There is a clear, unmistakable difference between light and darkness. Furthermore, light is more powerful as it is able to drive darkness away. This is what Solomon observed in regard to wisdom and folly – wisdom is far greater and far more powerful than folly. Taken by itself, this verse seems to fit the tone of the book of Proverbs more than Ecclesiastes – emphasizing the benefits of wisdom, rather than the hardships and futility of life. Yet as Solomon continues, he quickly gets back to the futility and vanity of even as noble a pursuit as wisdom.

The wise man is able to discern his path and will therefore avoid trouble whenever possible. The fool is in darkness, unable to see where he is going or what dangers lie ahead (2:14). Clearly, wisdom is to be preferred over folly. Yet as he looked to the future – namely death – Solomon saw the common link between the two. Both the wise man and the fool will suffer the same fate. Again, it is important to remember the perspective from which this book is written. It pertains to things *under the sun*. In this regard, there is no difference between the wise and the fool, even though, as Solomon will acknowledge later, there is a difference in the *eternal* fate of the wise man and the fool. But both the wise man and the foolish man will go to the grave at the end of this life.

At this realization, Solomon makes a declaration that sounds hopeless: “*As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?*” (2:15). For what purpose did Solomon “*set [his] mind to seek and explore by wisdom*” (1:13)? He would one day be dead, just as the fool would be. So he concluded that his diligent pursuit of wisdom was vanity.

Solomon was a unique case. He is remembered and his words have been preserved because they are part of the Scriptures. But for the vast majority of people, what the wise man says is true: whether you are wise or a fool, you will be forgotten (2:16). This has nothing to do with anyone personally, since “*in the coming days all will be forgotten.*” Both the wise man and the fool will die. What, then, is the purpose of acquiring wisdom if we will not be remembered for it?

Wisdom was the defining characteristic of Solomon. Yet this wisdom was not going to save him from the fate which awaited the fool – death. Therefore, Solomon says he “*hated life*” (2:17). That which he diligently pursued was futility. It is frustrating and depressing for one to come to the realization that what he has worked diligently to accomplish is meaningless. This is the condition Solomon found himself in here. That which he had done under the sun was, as he discovered, “*futility and striving after wind.*” Even wisdom, which is a good thing to pursue, if one does not look beyond this life, will seem to be futile.

The Futility of Labor

Read: Ecclesiastes 2:18-26

The beginning of this chapter considered the labors of Solomon, and the wise man concluded, “*All was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun*” (2:11). Here he goes a step further. More than seeing the fruit of his labor as vanity, Solomon says he “*hated all the fruit of [his] labor*” (2:18). The reason is that he will have to leave all these things to someone else. The next verse explains why this is a problem – he could be either “*a wise man or a fool*” (2:19).

There was no guarantee for Solomon that those things he gained from a lifetime of working would be used wisely by those who would come after him. They may act wisely or foolishly. As he noted in the book of Proverbs, “*A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children*” (Proverbs 13:22). Yet there is no way to ensure that the children of the good man will act wisely, allowing the grandchildren to enjoy the fruit of his labor. At death, he surrenders control of his estate. The provisions he made for future generations may be quickly squandered.

This realization caused Solomon to “*completely [despair] of all the fruit of [his] labor for which [he] had labored under the sun*” (2:20). He had already discovered that life was temporary and that one could find no lasting satisfaction in life. His last hope of finding fulfillment with the material rewards of work was that those who would come after him would be able to enjoy what he was able to provide them,

thus leaving a remembrance of him in future generations. Yet he realized that his best intentions could be in vain.

Accomplishing the things Solomon did required a great deal of work. Anything we earn for our labors in this life requires the things he mentioned: *wisdom*, *knowledge*, and *skill* (2:21). Yet the laborer who works diligently and exercises wisdom in order to be able to gain, acquire, or accomplish what he does, when he dies, will leave all of these things to another – one who did not work for them and will, therefore, not appreciate them or use them as wisely as the one who worked for them.

What, then, is accomplished by all of our labors? The fruit of our labors cannot bring lasting fulfillment. The wealth we acquire will be left for others to squander. The accomplishments we make will be forgotten. So the wise man says that what we are left with are pain and stress (2:22-23). While the labor is being done, there is pain. During breaks from work, such as at night, there is stress and worry associated with work. The wise man notes that this is vanity.

Knowing, then, the futility of our labors and the hardships that they cause, Solomon says that a man must simply eat and drink and tell himself that what he is doing is good (2:24-25). While work is important, despite Solomon's depressing analysis, it is also proper to enjoy the blessings of this life. These blessings ultimately come from God. Without Him there would be no good things to enjoy.

Solomon then says, "*For 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*" (2:26). The beginning of this verse is similar to some of the thoughts expressed in the book of Proverbs in which emphasis is placed upon *righteousness* causing one to be blessed (in this case, blessed with wisdom, knowledge, and joy). *Wickedness* would cause one not only to be cursed, but his calamity that would come as a result would further enrich the righteous. The wise man writes in Proverbs, "*The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous*" (Proverbs 13:22). Yet even then, Solomon concludes that this is vanity. Focusing on life *under the sun*, the same fate awaits both the righteous and the wicked, regardless of their different circumstances in life.

Questions on Chapter 2

1. Should verse 3 be seen as permission for God's people to drink alcohol? Explain.
2. In verses 4-6, Solomon uses the phrase "*for myself*" four times. Why is this significant?
3. How does wisdom excel folly in this life (2:13)?
4. What is the common fate of both the wise man and the fool (2:14)?
5. Why did Solomon say he hated the fruit of his labor (2:18)?
6. Why does Solomon say it is a "*great evil*" for one to leave his legacy to another (2:21)?
7. In verses 24-25, what does Solomon recognize about the source of our blessings?

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Ecclesiastes Study Guide
by Andy Sochor
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