



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Pursuing Satisfaction in This World (Ecclesiastes 1:1-18)

Brent Alderman / PO Box 2060, Annapolis, MD 21404 / brent.alderman@capitolcom.org / 240.818.3053

Our new series of studies will be in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. That word might look familiar to you if you're familiar with the Greek word in the New Testament for "church" or "assembly" (ekklesia). Here, Ecclesiastes refers to the one who calls the assembly together, or the Preacher, as the author calls himself in the first verse.

Ecclesiastes is found within a section of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature, often incorporating poetry in its structure. There is great wisdom in this book and it's my prayer that we all might get a better glimpse of what is most important and what should guide our thinking and actions in this life. As leaders, these are crucial truths to understand, internalize and apply.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE NOTE THAT THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES IS A BOOK THAT DEALS WITH THE NATURAL MAN SEARCHING FOR THE MEANING IN LIFE.

- CHUCK SMITH -

INTRODUCTION (1:1)

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

The identity of the author is made plain in the first words of the book. Solomon, son of David and third king of Israel, penned these words and as one who received great wisdom from God, has tremendous credibility in writing about the nature of life and the world. Some difficult issues are tackled and we learn much from the knowledge and experience of a political ruler who also possessed special abilities in leadership.

Solomon was famous for many reasons. His kingship, wisdom and wealth were legendary. His marital choices were well-known (700 wives and 300 concubines). He authored much of the book of Proverbs as well as the Song of Solomon, two poetical books also considered Wisdom Literature. He also failed in many ways as the leader of his nation and his legacy was a sad story of compromise and a division of the kingdom one generation after his death. This is what makes Ecclesiastes so interesting – the thoughts of a complex, fascinating leader as he searches for life's meaning. Let's get into the text and see what Solomon sees regarding satisfaction in this world.

I. NECESSARY EVIL (1:2-4)

Ecclesiastes 1:2-4 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

Are you surprised by the depressing way this book begins? For someone with Solomon's talent and opportunities, he certainly has a sad view of the world. Vanity is described by a word here that means "vapor" or "breath". That brings to mind the verse we studied recently in James:

James 4:14 . . . yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

We all know how fast life flies by, especially as we age! Solomon writes this near the end of life to instruct younger generations that feel as if life can go on forever. The transitory nature of life is swift even though the earth itself remains. The optimism of youth gives way to realism as our years increase and we realize that we (hopefully) pass on something of value to those who come after us.

This is a necessary evil in the world in which we live. Someone once said the problem with life is that it is so daily. How easy it is to get into daily patterns that can feel pointless and endless. The kind of emptiness Solomon speaks of here has been sensed by us all in the weariness of everyday living. Many have wondered, "What's the point?" When satisfaction is based in our world's system only, hopelessness will be the result.

II. NATURAL EXAMPLES (1:5-8)

Ecclesiastes 1:5-8 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

Solomon was a learned man who excelled in all the disciplines. His understanding of the natural world was vast. As he observed the world around him he came to the same conclusion as he did when observing a man's life, namely that the same pattern of weariness could be proven. Watching the created order, he sees the scene

Maryland

Pursuing Satisfaction in This World (Ecclesiastes 1:1-18)

playing out the same way – the cycle of emptiness continues with no end in sight.

This is the only way to see a world that, we are told, came into existence through a random accident with no design or purpose. There can be no hope, no direction or morality. Each person can make up their own rules which are just as good as the next person's. We are all a cosmic accident and the wind, sun and streams all show that the unending cycle leads us nowhere. This is the futility of the mind that has no care for God. Solomon, in these first words of the book and as one who does believe in a Creator God, is setting up his argument against this godless worldview.

In his book "Ecclesiastes: The Inspired Book of Error", Ray Stedman analyzes Solomon's method in these verses.

Therefore the Bible does have much error in it. Whenever false views of men are quoted or set forth, the Bible is speaking error. Whenever Satan speaks, most of his statements are in error, and even the truth that he uses is twisted and distorted, and therefore is erroneous.¹

III. NOVELTY'S EXCLUSIVENESS (1:9-11)

Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

Our senses are always craving something new and novel. Solomon has already said that our eyes and ears are never satisfied with the things of this world. They tire us, we need more variety. It seems strange that someone writing around ten centuries before Christ would say that nothing new is possible, since obviously he had never seen movable type, combustible engines or microprocessors.

Again, remember that the author is reflecting a natural mind that sees only the repetitious patterns of the world around him. Newness is short-lived and as soon as something novel appears on the scene, it's obsolete the same day. Newness doesn't last and with eyes and ears that seek diversity and excitement, the world has little to offer. This is a stunning statement from a man whose understanding of the natural sciences was second-to-none.

IV. NARRATOR'S EXPERIENCE (1:12-18)

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

You can just feel Solomon's desire to get his impressions of life across to younger generations that might listen to his experience. He gave his life to the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom and understanding. He had an innate curiosity that drove him to go deeper into the meaning of life and grasp the significance of it all. Yet after a lifetime of such pursuits, all he could relate was an unsatisfied soul, a soul that sought more.

Over and over through Ecclesiastes, Solomon uses the phrase "under the sun". By this he means the world as it is. Wind blowing, men working, gaining knowledge, all that you can see is what is "under the sun" and as Solomon sees it all, he is not impressed – there is something missing to the sum of what the world offers. In fact, he describes it as "striving after wind". Could there be a sadder result than spending a life chasing wind? How useless is that?

The conclusion from the wisest man who ever lived is that knowledge will not save you from this bondage to vanity. There have been many smart people throughout history and many are in the world today who count themselves smart, yet Solomon summarizes for us that knowledge only further exposes the meaninglessness of life. The more you understand, the more you will sense that this world, and all that it promises, just does not satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

¹ Stedman, Ray. "Ecclesiastes: The Inspired Book of Error." Discovery Publishing. Blue Letter Bible. 1 Mar 1996. 2013. 28 Mar 2013.