

II. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

From Vanity to Vitality

“Is There Any Hope?”

Ecclesiastes 1:12

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My goal in this study is to cover Ecclesiastes chapter 1 and 2 in our second study of this book. We are not given in the Bible the timetable of the fall of Satan but we do know that upon his fall he comes in a deceptive appearance as a snake to Eve and Adam and with deceit. He comes to draw Adam and Eve into sin by questioning the veracity of God and drawing their heart and soul to take the place of God, where life is not made in the image and glory of God but for you to take the place of God. God doesn't want us to do that and that is why He says not to eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation, eat and find out that life apart from God, under the sun as if you are God, actually brings death – spiritual death, physical death and under the judgment of eternal death.

Immediately they want to solve the meaningless that is experienced through their fear, shame and guilt. So their first solution is the sewing together of the leaves as loin coverings. Then there is the hiding behind the trees and finally the attempt to cover up by playing the victim. Genesis 3:9–10 says [9] *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”* [10] *And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”* How did Adam know he was naked? Sin. Our solutions to our fear, shame, guilt, and meaninglessness of our sins, never suffice so Adam still sense his fear, shame and guilt. Then he tries one more solution of playing the victim and blaming someone else to the point that he not only blamed his dysfunctional wife but he blamed God as if God was dysfunctional by giving him that wife. This doesn't work

Now let's fast forward to the book of Ecclesiastes. We are about to be exposed to the same dynamic by the writer of Ecclesiastes. We saw in the last study that historically it has been accepted that that the writer of this book is Solomon, but since then there have been those that have questioned it. Let's see who it seems to point to as the writer by looking at Ecclesiastes 1. Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 says, [1] *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* [2] *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

[3] *What does man gain by all the toil*

at which he toils under the sun?

[4] *A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

[5] *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

[6] *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.*

[7] *All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

[8] *All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;*

*the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.
[9] 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.
[10] Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?
It has been already
in the ages before us.
[11] There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.*

Solomon was the king of Jerusalem and he was a preacher, one who led an assembly, a conductor. What an opening to a sermon! I'm about ready to take a gun to my head after this introduction because of how he begins to articulate that all is vanity. Some of the reason why some think Solomon wasn't the writer of this book is due to some phrases found throughout the book that would have been found in the Babylonian and Persian Empire time which was after the reign of Solomon. Another reason is because later in the book it talks about how multiple kings went before him but there were not multiple kings before Solomon for we know seemingly there were just two – Saul and David. Lastly, there are some Greek philosophical declarations and considerations in the book, such as Epicureanism, skepticism, cynicism, stoicism and hedonism, yet the Greeks also came after Solomon. So for those reasons many don't think now that Solomon wrote this book but the chief culprit is usually Ezra where he is basically giving a first person sermon as he takes on the mantle of Solomonic wisdom.

I've heard these scholars' reasons but I'm just not convinced that Solomon didn't write this book. Yes Saul and David were kings before Solomon but there were multiple kings before them because it was a Jebusite city with Jebusite kings. I also think these borrowed phrases from Babylon and Persia were very likely from copyists who were influenced by those around them as they were putting it in the language of the people after their return from the Babylonian captivity. Thirdly, while they awaited the Greeks to give names to the philosophical propositions going around, the philosophies were around long before they were named. These philosophies can be found embedded in the book of Proverbs. So I think Solomon is the writer of this book.

I think the One who is really writing this book, who will bring us to the Gospel answers to the seeming despair throughout this book, is Jesus. I will try to show you this from Ecclesiastes. Let's look at Ecclesiastes 12.

Ecclesiastes 12:1–11 says [1] *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”*; [2] *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, [3] in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, [4] and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— [5] they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— [6] before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, [7] and the*

dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. [8] Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

[9] Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. [10] The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

*[11] The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by **one Shepherd**.*

Shepherd is one of the wonderful titles that Jesus embraces and brings before us concerning Himself. Here is the answer to the vanity for it will be found from the one Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd and that's Christ Himself. What is Christ going to tell us?

First, He brings us to the bad news of the reality of what sin had done. Sin has brought meaningless even to those things that God has created to experience under the sun. There are three phrases that will be repeated all throughout this book. One is 'under the sun.' Many times we want to talk with people about life after death but to properly understand life after death you also have to understand life before death – the life under the sun. Another phrase is 'all is vanity' and he makes the declaration that when all is said and all is done, all is vanity under the sun. The word vanity means a vapor, meaningless.

I think this is very important for this to be seen as Solomonic because it fits first of all in the trilogy of the Song of Solomon, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. I believe in a sense that what we see in Ecclesiastes is Solomon's statement of repentance as the end of his life. He started out well for he asked early on in his reign for wisdom from God and we find this in Proverbs. We find his heart in the Song of Solomon. His repentance comes through in Ecclesiastes and at the end of this book we are brought to the fear of the Lord, which according to Proverbs is the beginning of wisdom. This is where he will be taking us in this book.

First he is taking us to life under the sun and what it means to live this life because in the midst of this life we keep being brought to meaninglessness. When I was growing up there was a TV program called Hee Haw and during each episode you would hear a song with words that said 'Gloom, despair, and agony on me! Deep dark depression, excessive misery! If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all!' By the time they would finish that song I just wanted to grab a gun and shoot myself. That is basically what Solomon is singing for us in this book. There is gloom and despair in every experience, every moment and every day. It's all empty, meaningless, nothing – life under the sun.

Life lived apart from the transcendence of God, the answers of God, and the solutions of God is temporary. It seems as if the earth had the victory. It seems that what goes around comes around and instead of the joy of a linear world and life view of a beginning coming to a glorious consummation, it just seems to be the meaningless repetition and anything and everything you experience. Solomon begins to lay some out in these opening verses of Ecclesiastes.

I find it absolutely insightful that many things we have yet to discover when this is written, seem to be accommodated in this text. While looking at it from the experience of life as we see the sun rising and setting, he gives you an insight that maybe there's something more and that is that something is rotating or revolving as the sun rises and sets as it hastens back to its beginning. We know that the sun hastens not by its movement but the earth's movement. Then he goes to the circular movements of the wind which was something that was yet to be found out when this was written. Then there is this indication of the hydrological cycle. There is the water being collected in the streams, as they run to the sea and the sea doesn't fill up to overflowing. Why? It is because evaporation takes place and it all hastens back to its beginning again. The rains come and the streams fill up.

The writer of this book is anticipating scientific experiments but in the midst of it he is communicating utter despair. He says his eye will see something beautiful but it's only for a moment of experience and then he needs more. His ear hears something and it is filled up but then he needs to hear something else because it empties out. When he experiences something it ends and needs something else to experience. He needs something new for what he has had, seen, heard and touched is not only seeming repetition but it all ends in emptiness and he needs something else new. Unless he writes it down he soon forgets it for there is no remembrance nor would there be any remembrance because the latter things are as meaningless as the former things.

What is the answer to this emptiness, this despair, this vanity? It's all just boring. The preacher says that under the sun he is going to look for a solution. He comes up with four solutions to this emptiness. Certainly there is salvation somewhere to this meaninglessness under the sun. Where is this solution under the sun?

The first solution is found in Ecclesiastes 1:12–18 which says [12] I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. [13] *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.* [14] *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

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

[16] *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."*

[17] *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.*

[18] *For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

In his experiences there is nothing but emptiness. Have you ever taken a metal coat hanger apart, untwisted it? Can you put it back the way it was after you have untwisted it? No. Tell me how long you have tried to do that and I'll tell you how much time you've wasted. That's madness. It's vexation. What has become twisted under the sun through sin, can't be put back together. I know the answer to this. Don't try to put it back, try to understand this madness. I need another degree. I need to enroll in another school. I know what it is, education. Does that sound familiar? School is the answer, right? The only problem with this is that the school gets full of the same vanity and madness.

Education isn't the answer but that doesn't mean education is bad or that we dismiss it. Read the book of Proverbs. The education under the sun is not the solution for it is as empty as what you are trying to understand. Now you have educated yourself into imbecility. The fool has said in his heart, there is no God (Psalm 14:1). Even in all the sophistication of education, life under the sun is a life not solved by education, because the education under the sun is as vain as that which you are trying to understand with the education.

So here he is looking for wisdom under the sun but then finds out that his life that's so twisted, can't be straightened out with education. He can't transform that culture that is around him which is also empty or reform his life with this education that is under the sun. Life under the sun is empty and cannot be touched by education that is under the sun. It simply adds to the meaninglessness. In that wisdom, the text says, is much vexation and that knowledge only increases the despair and the sorrow. Is the issue the problem with education? No, it is the notion of the idolatry of education that's content is under the sun.

I remember after I was converted that I all of a sudden wanted to start learning things. It's amazing how you want to learn after you become a Christian and the Bible calls you to learn. I went back to school and my grade point average greatly improved. I then get a call to the ministry and realized I needed more education for that so I went to Covenant College in the early 1970s. I'll never forget an experience I had sitting in a classroom there, thinking 'Are you kidding me?' I learned more in that one classroom than I had learned in two years at another school I had gone to and that was because it was a Christian education from a Christian world and life view, under the preeminence of Christ – a Christian mind. I got so excited.

I was will and ready to move and I did something that if my children had done I might have disowned them. With my wife expecting our first child, \$75 in our pocket, we drove up to that college and enrolled in school. God is gracious to His people in many ways and He was gracious to us. I had also heard them sing their college hymn which was *All For Jesus, All For Jesus* and the words were;

*All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being's ransomed pow'rs;
All my thoughts and words and doings,
All my days and all my hours.
All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my days and all my hours.
All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my days and all my hours.*

You mean my head can actually be used for something other than a baseball cap or a golf visor? I confess to you that thrill of learning life from the perspective above the sun, a God-centered, Christ-exalting world and life view, based not on man's philosophical wanderings but upon Divine relation – the inspired, inherent Word of God that deals with all of life. It has been glorious.

The problem is not education. The problem was the solution of education that was under the sun. It only adds to the vexation and sorrow. It cannot answer it. It doesn't matter how many degrees for the degrees of an education under the sun, not only doesn't solve it but adds to the vexation of society.

So if that doesn't work, the writer takes us to another god as a solution. Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 says [1] *I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. [2] I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" [3] I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. [4] I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. [5] I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. [6] I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. [7] I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. [8] I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.*

[9] *So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. [10] And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. [11] Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*

If the answer isn't found in education then the answer is found in appetite gratification. I will do everything I can to make sure all of my appetites are satiated and gratified, full to overflowing. Solomon didn't leave anything out. He had it all. He had the wine, women and song. He satiated himself with all of it. Here was Solomon the epicurean, the hedonist, who would deny himself nothing, own everything he possibly could, plant things that would fill his appetite of eating and drinking and the result was nothing but emptiness. God given appetites that can be given to the glory of God can be enjoyed but God given appetites that are gratified in the place of God lead only to nothingness and only adds to its meaninglessness. It is more striving after the wind, more emptiness. Let's go to the next section.

Ecclesiastes 2:12–17 says [12] *So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. [13] Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. [14] The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. [15] Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. [16] For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! [17] So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

His third solution is deciding to put wisdom (education) and self-gratification (hedonism) together. There were meaningful experiences of exhilaration at the moment in all of them but when all was said and done the educated was no better off than the fool. The one gratified in the appetite was as empty as the one who had no gratification. I'm still empty. Education under the sun doesn't work and neither does gratification of the appetites under the sun. Doing them both together doesn't work. Let's look now at his fourth solution.

Ecclesiastes 2:18–26 says [18] *I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, [19] and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. [20] So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, [21] because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. [22] What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? [23] For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

[24] *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, [25] for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? [26] For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

His fourth solution is to work for success for your work and success will be your solution. I will keep working and adding to my possessions and that will give me meaning. Notice how the writer really keeps going back and forth in all four of these solutions to where they really aren't in clear categories because he seems to keep moving from one to the other. Like while I'm pursuing my appetites I'm holding onto wisdom and I'm also toiling as I become great in Jerusalem for nobody was like me. Look at all that I have, own, and accomplished. I have everything and have access to everything yet it is meaningless.

You have all heard this statement – You've never seen a U-haul behind a hearse. When you're called home everything you have worked for here is still here. You will be amazed at

who gets it when you leave here. You won't be able to control all you had after you die but there is no guarantee that what you want to happen to it will not matter the legal documents you sign. The bumper sticker I like says – being of sound mind and body I spent it. Perhaps it would be better to say 'being of sound mind I gave it.'

I was talking to a man who I greatly respect his knowledge of finances and he said to me "Harry, I talk with Christians all the time who say they want to protect all that they have so that they can give it to their children and then I ask them how many kids they have. They tell me and then I tell them to add another kid and say 'what would you like for these resources to do for the Kingdom of God when you leave, why don't you add that to your plan?'" The fact is that even in those best plans one government legislative act can send it to who knows where. It is amazing who will control it.

Life under the sun is not answered by success in work under the sun. Again, is there anything wrong with education or gratification under the glory of God? No. These things have been created that you might enjoy them as you give thanks to Lord. I Corinthians 10:31 says *[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* All of these things have their place when it is governed above the sun but when it is under the sun the solutions actually exacerbate the vanity and the meaninglessness. Even in the midst of this, the answer punches through.

All of a sudden the writer starts speaking of God. All that God has made in the world that was good has been subjected to vanity all because of the curse of sin. Whenever you try to raise up your solution under the sun to it from that which God has created only exacerbates the problem but in the midst of all this the writer says this is the hand of God. It is God who is bringing this meaningless to bear in my mind and heart that I might know that the answer is not found under the sun. The answer is found above the sun, the One who made the sun, earth and all that is in it. It is His wisdom, His knowledge that brings His joy instead of vanity and that's where my answer will be found.

To the unrepentant sinner, it is merely what you have put together and watch how God will eventually use it where He wants to use it and gives it to whom He wants to give it. See the vanity not only of this earth under the curse of sin but your solutions under the sun and then watch what God does with it when you have life before death and not know life after death. Those are the writer's solutions and where he has brought them.

Paul uses this when he writes in Romans 3 that there is none who is righteous, no not one. There is no one who understands. No one seeks God and have turned to their own ways. Until your heart and mind are owned by God there is none who understand. Paul gets to the verdict in Romans 3:23 which says *[23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* All of the solutions under the sun only add to the vexation but praise God Paul doesn't end in Romans 3:23. He gets to Romans 6:23 which says *[23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

When you pursue sin because you want God's place there is a God who has loved you and sent His Son to take your place. That is God's solution for your answer came from beyond the sun, when the heavens were opened and the Son of God came down to this earth to take our place on the cross. Sin under the sun eradicates meaning, joy and anything for any period of time for all of life. There will be momentary exhilarations of sin but then you will need another experience to top that and deeper into depravity you will have to go and deeper into vexation you will be. The solutions under the sun, penetrated by man's rebellion against God, never answers.

Look at those in our world who control much of the money and fame in whom we call celebrities. Look at the hours and money they spend on therapists. It doesn't work for the gods don't deliver. There is no solution to sin's destruction under the sun. It's only more vanity. But there is a God who loves you and there's a glorious moment that strikes at our heart—Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me? If there is anyone who ought not to be forsaken it was Him, but He was, for you. Your solution is the One who came to this earth to save you from your sins.

I love the gloaming part of the day where day is becoming night. The breeze is blowing and the lights are starting to shimmer. That is my favorite time of the day. Poets call this time of day the gloaming and they have many words to rhyme with it and many poems that extol it. I remember an experience growing up and being in the back yard. There were five pine trees in our back yard and I laid underneath them. I looked up in the sky as the bright blue of the sky was getting a darker blue and soon to become a dark night. Then I began to see stars upon stars coming out. I remember being overwhelmed at the infinitude of the heavens and then the sense of eternity. Then came the question, 'Why am I here?' I was only 10 years old but I remember it like it was yesterday. I found a way to cope with it and dismiss that question pretty quickly.

Then I remember another night at another house I lived in growing up where I was laying on my side listening to the radio. The music stopped and I cut it down. I could then feel my heart beat and realized that one day it won't beat. Then I remember a night in my sophomore year of college where it was one more effort of self-absorption, self-gratification and self-exaltation. When the party was over and everyone had left, I was sitting outside looking at that same sky and I realized how empty I was. It was nothing.

I want to tell you what God very graciously did for me. God allowed me to flunk out of that college and I greatly helped Him accomplish that. I came home thinking I was going into the Marine Corp but God had someone else for me to meet and that was Cindy. I saw someone who had stability and meaning that I didn't have. I put the blustering picture on it but she had it and I didn't but I wanted it. In the kindness of God, I found it because He found me. The answer was no longer me under the sun, but the answer was now the God of glory who became the Shepherd of my soul.

It is that answer that the Preacher is going to continue to bring us to so let's keep taking the journey through the book of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher is honest about the issue, the problem and the only solution – the God of glory who alone brings meaning, knowledge and joy. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in the Word of God. Thank You for the majesty and insightfulness of Your Word that is so wonderful and great that You even overcome the inadequacies of those whom You call to preach. You create a hunger in those whom You call to hear and then You use that Word to create in us the dissolution of vanity, the eradication of despair and the joy of hope in the Lord of glory, who has loved us and who we hold in reverence and awe – the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.