

# ECCLESIASTES 1

## EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS

*"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" King Solomon, who lived as opulent a life as any man could imagine, shares his view of what it all brought him. In the modern world, many will tell you to "make your own purpose" or "the meaning of life is something you create." Allow King Solomon to inform you otherwise. -JT*

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

2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.  
"Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless."

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

4 Generations come and generations go,  
but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets,  
and hurries back to where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south  
and turns to the north;  
round and round it goes,  
ever returning on its course.

7 All streams flow into the sea,  
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,

there they return again.

8 All things are wearisome,  
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,  
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

9 What has been will be again,  
what has been done will be done

again;

there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there anything of which one can say,

"Look! This is something new"?

It was here already, long ago;  
it was here before our time.

11 No one remembers the former generations,

and even those yet to come  
will not be remembered  
by those who follow them.

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly,

but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;  
the more knowledge, the more grief.

### STUDY NOTES

[BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org) Commentary

**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 show us the futility and foolishness of a life lived without an eternal perspective.

"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 judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.'" (Kidner)

"What, then, is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative." (Eaton)

The Puritan commentator John Trapp wrote what some others also believe, that Ecclesiastes was Solomon's statement of error and penance, and evidence that he turned back to God at the end of his life — despite the absence of such assurance in 1 Kings 11. "He penned this penitential sermon, grown an old man, he had experimented all this that he here affirmeth, so that he might better begin his speech to his scholars." (Trapp)

**Everything is meaningless:** "It is an absolutely accurate statement of life when it is lived under certain conditions; but it is not true as a statement of what life must necessarily be." (Morgan) If you say, "My life isn't vanity; it isn't



meaningless. My life is filled with meaning and purpose." That's wonderful; but you can't ignore the premise of the Preacher — the premise of life under the sun.

Therefore Ecclesiastes is filled with what we might call true lies. 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 us think through this wrong perspective thoroughly through Ecclesiastes.

**In which he toils under the sun:** This is the first stating of an essential theme through Ecclesiastes. This phrase will be repeated more than 25 times through the book. The idea isn't "on a sunny day" or something having to do with the weather. The idea is "in this world that we can see; the material world." It is life considered without an eternal perspective. "If our view of life goes no further than 'under the sun', all our endeavours will have an undertone of misery." (Eaton)

**One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever:** Using several examples, the Preacher observes that nothing seems to change very much in the seemingly unending cycle of nature. "He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs." (Maclaren)

"All the rivers of earthly joy may be flowing into your heart, but they will never fill it. They may recede, or dry up, or ebb; but if not, still they will never satisfy.... But in Christ there is perennial interest.... We need not go outside of Him for new delights; and to know Him is to possess a secret which makes all things new." (Meyer)

**All things are full of labor; man cannot express it:** Solomon then observed that the meaninglessness of life wasn't only reflected in nature. This frustration is also evident in human effort and endeavor. Despite all man's working (**labor**), **seeing**, and **hearing**, he is still

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**not satisfied.** "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." (Clarke)

**That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and 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, so it could be said "there is nothing new under the sun." The more things change, the more they stay the same. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. "In their new guise the old ways go on. As a race, we never learn." (Kidner)

There may be **nothing new under the sun**; but thankfully the followers of Jesus — those born again by God's Spirit — don't live **under the sun** in that sense. Their life is filled with new things.

- A new name (Isaiah 62:2, Revelation 2:17).
- A new community (Ephesians 2:14).
- A new help from angels (Psalm 91:11).
- A new commandment (John 13:34).
- A new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33, Matthew 26:28).
- A new and living way to heaven (Hebrews 10:20).
- A new purity (1 Corinthians 5:7).
- A new nature (Ephesians 4:24).
- A new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- All things become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17, Revelation 21:5).

**What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered:** The Preacher's initial search for the answers in wisdom (under the sun) brought him only despair. "The third conclusion explains why the 'under the sun' thinker is so frustrated. It is because there are twists (what is crooked) and gaps (what is lacking) in all thinking. No matter how the thinker ponders, he cannot straighten out life's anomalies, nor reduce all he sees to a neat system." (Eaton)

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**"MEANINGLESS! MEANINGLESS!"  
SAYS THE TEACHER.**



**"UTTERLY MEANINGLESS!  
EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS."**

**ECCLESIASTES 1:2**



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