

September 1, 2024

The Point: Apart from God, life is meaningless.

Session Passage: Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

Ecclesiastes 1:1-7

Connection to the Point. The Teacher saw everything in life as meaningless.

The book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes falls into the category of the Bible's wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) and is a reflection on the meaning of life, specifically that a life without God, no matter how much one attains or acquires in this world, is ultimately without meaning. The English title is derived from the Septuagint's (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) title *Ekklesiastes*, which is a translation of the Hebrew *qoheleth*. Both terms refer to one who presides over an assembly.

The Teacher (v. 1). The exact meaning of the Hebrew term (*qoheleth*) is uncertain. It may refer to "a speaker in the assembly." The term is also translated in some Bible translations as "Preacher." It is a title, not a proper name. Although the writer was both a "son of David" and "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (v. 12), he wrote not as a monarch and ruler over a nation, but as a teacher, one examining the meaning of life.

Son of David, king in Jerusalem (v. 1). The book has traditionally been attributed to David's son Solomon. These identifiers, along with "king over Israel in Jerusalem" (v. 12), imply Solomonic authorship. Solomon was the only descendant of David who reigned over a united Israel, as the nation split in two after his death (1 Kings 12:1-17). Solomon wrote not as a king handing down decrees, but as a teacher seeking and providing understanding regarding the meaning of life. As the Teacher, he was the leader of a group of believers and his demeanor was that of an older, repentant leader—particularly in regard to his period of pagan worship (11:1-13)—who knew his own frailty and personally sought meaning in life.¹

Absolute futility (v. 2). This is a translation of the double use of the Hebrew word *hebel* for emphasis, hence the use of the term *absolute*. *Hebel* means "breath" or "vapor." It is used as a synonym for the wind (Isa. 57:13; see Eccl. 1:14). The word is also used to contrast the Lord, who is the believer's strength and refuge in time of trouble, with the emptiness of idols (*hebel*) that cannot deliver those who worship them (Jer. 16:19; Jonah 2:8). In the context of Ecclesiastes, *hebel* refers to the insubstantial and transitory nature of life.

Gain (v. 3). The word (*yithron*) is a commercial term which refers to "profit," "gain," or "advantage." It has the sense of searching for real advantage or what is truly excellent in life. It comes from a verb (*yathar*) that means "to be left over" or "to remain." In the end, no one finishes life having a net gain for all their striving, hard toil, and suffering.

Efforts (v. 3). The word (*amal*) refers to hard physical labor, usually in relation to the unpleasant factors associated with work. At the fall, God cursed the ground, so that it would only yield its produce by hard toil (Gen. 3:17-19). The ground wars against people's efforts, working against those whom God commanded to take dominion over the land as His stewards (1:28). From a worldly perspective the **labors** (again *amal*) of this

life are vain and futile. They require exhausting work (toil) and yield drudgery, anguish, and misery; even that which is achieved by such efforts ultimately does not last.

Under the sun (v. 3). The Hebrew phrase appears in no other book in the Old Testament. This phrase corresponds to “under heaven” (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 7:24; 9:14); both phrases represent life in this world. *Under the sun* refers to what existence looks like from a merely earthly perspective without God, an afterlife, or a final judgment. Solomon’s presupposition was that he had restricted the scope of his inquiry to only those things that were under the sun. Although he acknowledged the existence of God (Eccl. 1:13) and the wisdom in fearing Him (5:7; 7:18; 8:12), only in chapters 11–12 did Solomon’s focus fully shift to an understanding that a meaningful life is one in which a person has a relationship of fear of (reverence) and obedience to the Lord (12:13), living “in light of eternity.”²

Generation (v. 4). The Hebrew term (*dor*), like the English word “generation,” can refer to a period of time or to those living in a specific time period. The Hebrew term can also refer to the cycles of nature. The sun rises, sets, and rises again. Summer follows spring, winter follows fall. Water evaporates into the sky, returns as rain, then evaporates again. While commentators differ on its meaning in Ecclesiastes, the context allows for the term to refer to generations related to both humanity and nature.

The earth remains forever (v. 4). The size and expanse of the world remain constant throughout all generations. People are born, live, die, and are forgotten, but the world stands unmoved and indifferent.

Panting (v. 5). Solomon poetically painted the sun as a racer—the sun rises, moves through the sky, and then sets. The word for *panting* (*shaaph*) can have either positive or negative connotations. It can be used of a woman in labor, who gasps breathlessly (Isa. 42:14). It describes the longing of the psalmist for God’s Word, who was eager to taste God’s commands (Ps. 119:131). It also has the meaning of to trample; the psalmist described how his adversaries relentlessly trampled him (56:2). In Ecclesiastes 1:5, it could mean either the sun joyously rushes from sunrise to sunset, or that the sun toils from sunrise to sunset with no rest.

Weather (vv. 6-7). The ancient Israelites were primarily an agrarian society. Dependent upon the land, water, and weather for their food, they understood the yearly growing cycles related to planting, tending, and harvesting their various crops. However, they did not have our modern, scientific understanding of the earth (v. 4), the sun (v. 5), the wind (v. 6), and water (v. 7). Nature was monotonously predictable but at the same time incomprehensible. The sun rose, the sun set, and rose again. The yearly seasons came one after another, then repeated. The wind moved in cycles, but the cycles themselves were seemingly random and without purpose as the description of the wind “turning, turning” and that it “returns in its cycles” emphasizes. This is seen in the activities of streams as well. They ceaselessly flow into the sea, but the streams are never emptied and the seas are never full. Both the wind and the water are ever moving, but seemingly never accomplish anything.

Ecclesiastes 1:8-10

Connection to the Point. This meaningless life made the Teacher weary and unsatisfied.

Things (v. 8). The Hebrew term for *things* (*dabar*) literally means “words,” and has the meaning of “to speak.” It is used in reference to such things as commands, promises, and pronouncements. This was the word used to

describe the Ten Commandments (lit. “ten words,” Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). Solomon used the term in this verse to refer back to the forces of nature (Eccl. 1:4-7). The cyclical, never-ending movement of the sun, the wind, and the water are examples of the seeming absolute futility of life.

Wearisome (v. 8). The primary use of this Hebrew word (*yagea*) means “to work until one is tired or exhausted.” It comes from a verb (*yaga*) that describes the farmer’s labor in producing a harvest (Josh. 24:13) as well as the foolish pursuit of wealth that wears a person out (Prov. 23:4) and the person who wearies himself from spells and sorceries (Isa. 47:12,15). It can also describe those who grow tired in their pursuit of God (Lam. 5:5). The term’s most familiar usage is in Isaiah 40, where *yaga* emphasizes that while on their own people may grow weary, the Lord never grows weary and He renews the strength of those who trust in Him (Isa. 40:28-31). In the context of Ecclesiastes 1:3-8, the term *yagea* summarizes the meaninglessness of both human life and the world itself—all is vain repetition.

More than anyone can say (v. 8). This phrase is interpreted in two ways. First, the wearisome pursuit of life under the sun left Solomon wanting more of an explanation. Second, it could also be translated, “No one is able to speak.” Faced with the monotonous drudgery and seeming meaninglessness of life, Solomon had no words to say.

The eye . . . seeing (v. 8). Solomon turned to the senses of sight and sound to see if he could find the meaning of life. But seeing the nature of life left Solomon unsatisfied as well.

Satisfied (v. 8). The word (*saba*) means “to be full,” or “to have enough.” It also refers to being full to the point of overflowing, both literally and in reference to one’s appetites and desires. It describes how in response to the Israelites’ complaints during the exodus, God promised He would provide food for them and they would eat until they were full (Ex. 16:12). Also, the psalmist wrote that he would be satisfied with being in God’s presence (Ps. 17:15).

The examination of human life and nature left Solomon unfulfilled. His eyes could see, but this was not satisfying. Seeing is only part of the process. Perceiving someone or something does not automatically lead to understanding who that person is or what that thing is. Seeing the nature of life and the world did not provide Solomon with the answers he was seeking.

The ear . . . hearing (v. 8). All that Solomon heard neither satisfied him nor gave him the answers he sought. The Hebrew term for *hearing* (*shama*) generally means “to hear.” It can also be used in the follow ways—of listening to someone in the sense of paying attention (Job 33:1; Ps. 81:11), of obeying God’s commandments (Eccl. 5:1), of God hearing and answering someone’s prayers (Gen. 16:11; Judg. 13:9; Ps. 10:17), of hearing with understanding (Gen. 11:7), and listening critically. The words Solomon had heard, even from those considered to be wise (Eccl. 8:1), failed to provide a meaningful explanation of the nature of the world and life. They left Solomon wanting more.

What has been is what will be (v. 9). While the actors may come and go on the world stage and nations rise and fall, at the most basic level life and nature are cyclical, repetitive, closed systems. The cycles repeat over and over again. The sun rises, the sun sets, and the sun rises again. People are born, they live, they die, and others are born and repeat the same process. In this basic sense, nothing changes.

Nothing new under the sun . . . already existed (vv. 9-10). Solomon was not stating that technology could not advance and improve how we live life. But new inventions cannot break the cycle of sin, suffering, and death. Furthermore, people of every generation pursue the same things—fame, power, wealth, happiness, and so forth—and these things remain for the most part elusive. Even those who achieve such goals at the end of their lives find having those things changes nothing. Death still comes and all of one’s accolades, accomplishments, and possessions are left behind.

Even with all the advances and improvements by humanity in how we live, the central issue in life remains the same—sinful people need the love and forgiveness of God found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Apart from God, human experience and history for the most part consist of repetitive lives of toil, anguish, drudgery, and futility. “The past, the present, and the future are filled with oppression, hard work, and loneliness (4:1-12). There is nothing to look forward to.”³

Ecclesiastes 1:11-14

Connection to the Point. The Teacher looked for purpose but only found futility.

No remembrance (v. 11). The term *remembrance* (*zikkaron*) can refer to a memorial in the sense of a memorial day (Ex. 12:14), a memorial action (13:3-10), a memorial object (such as stones, Josh. 4:1-9), or a memorial in the sense of a record (such as a book, Mal. 3:16). Finally, as used in this verse, it may refer to the mental act of remembering.

One’s ancestry was important in Hebrew culture. It provided for one’s identity as a child of Abraham and a member of God’s covenant community. This is seen when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and identified Himself as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6). One of the constant themes God emphasized to the Israelites was to remember Him and what He had done for them so that they would not forget and go after the false gods and goddesses of the nations around them (Deut. 8:1-20).

But Solomon noted that ultimately most people, their deeds, and the memories of them are forgotten with the passing of time. Few are those who make such a mark under the sun that they are remembered and memorialized. But even such *remembrance* is in the end forgotten; the physical memorials may remain (for a time), but the significance of the people and events behind such memorials mean little or nothing to *those who will come after*.

Of those who came before . . . by those who follow them (v. 11). Again, Solomon emphasized the repetitive cycle all people are caught in. As one generation is born and grows to adulthood, past generations die and slowly fade from memory.

I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem (v. 12). Solomon, king of the united monarchy of Judah and Israel (reigned 970–930 BC), had the advantages of great wisdom, education, power, and wealth.

I applied my mind (v. 13). The term for *mind* (*leb*) means “heart.” The Hebrew word literally refers to the internal organ which pumps blood, but is also used in reference to the totality of a person’s inner being as well one’s emotions, mind, and will. This clause describes the focused and intentional manner with which Solomon searched for the meaning of life—he had set his heart (his whole being) on this search.

Examine and explore (v. 13). The term for *examine* (*darash*) means “to seek.” The word *explore* (*tur*) means “to search out with care” or “investigate.” Solomon was making an intentional, detailed study in his quest for the meaning of life.

Miserable task (v. 13). The writings of ancient wisdom and philosophic literature considered the search for wisdom to be the highest calling in life, by which a person gained lasting fulfillment and significance.⁴ However, Solomon labeled such a search a *miserable task*. The word *miserable* (*ra*) can be translated as “bad” or “disagreeable”; in the ethical sense it means “evil.” The search for the meaning of life in wisdom was a hopeless task because the answer was not to be found there. Because the meaning and purpose of life are found only in the context of God and a relationship with Him, wisdom and philosophy which leave God out of the equation can and do mislead; but, they are also evil as they redirect the focus of one’s life away from what God intends life to be in relationship with Him.

Keep them occupied (v. 13). The term *occupied* (*anah*) also can be translated as “to be afflicted” or “to bow down.” In this context, it encompasses all the pursuits of humans, including moral, ethical, and religious activities—“all the things that are done under the sun” (v. 14). It also includes Solomon’s pursuit for wisdom and understanding. Solomon did not despise education and human pursuits. He merely recognized that they had their limitations in a life that does not include God.

Futile, a pursuit of the wind (v. 14). Using the same Hebrew word for *futile* (*hebel*) as in verse 2, Solomon again acknowledged that all human pursuits apart from God are ultimately without lasting meaning and significance. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon noted the futility of searching for meaning and purpose in the pursuit of such things as wisdom and knowledge (1:12-18; 2:12-17), wealth and possessions (2:4-11; 5:10-20), pleasure (2:1-3), work (1:2-9), and politics (4:13-16; 5:8-9). These pursuits easily can and do become idols unto themselves. Solomon used the same term in reference to all the pleasures this life has to offer (2:1). In the end they are all “futile” (*hebel*) because they fail to satisfy.

Like chasing after the wind, all things done under the sun are a never-ending pursuit that leaves the pursuer unsatisfied and empty-handed. Only one who has a saving relationship with God (12:13-14) through Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18; 14:6) will find true meaning in life.

1. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.
2. Stephen R. Miller, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 455.
3. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.
4. Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 289.