

Ecclesiastes 1:1–18 — Life Under the Sun

Introduction

Ecclesiastes has often been called “*the Sphinx of the Bible*” because, like the great stone monument in Egypt, it presents itself as something mysterious, puzzling, and difficult to interpret. A sphinx is known for its riddles, and in the same way, Ecclesiastes confronts its readers with riddles about the meaning of life.

Here are some reasons why scholars and readers use that description:

1. Its Puzzling Nature

Ecclesiastes doesn’t read like the rest of Scripture. Instead of straightforward promises or commands, it is full of paradoxes, questions, and apparent contradictions. For example:

- “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, NKJV).
- Yet at the same time: “It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor” (Ecclesiastes 5:18, NKJV).

It almost feels like the writer is pulling in two directions—declaring life meaningless and yet urging us to enjoy it.

2. The Human Perspective of Life “Under the Sun”

Much of the book is written from a human vantage point, describing life as it appears “under the sun.” When we leave God out of the picture, life seems circular, fleeting, and unsatisfying. The Preacher (Solomon) is intentionally wrestling with life’s biggest questions in the rawest way possible, almost like a philosopher. This perspective makes the book feel enigmatic—because it often raises the problem without immediately giving the solution.

3. Its Abrupt Shifts

The style of Ecclesiastes can feel jarring. At one moment the Preacher is despairing about the futility of life; at another he points to God as the source of true joy and meaning. The shifting tone can feel like riddles that must be worked through carefully to see the consistent thread.

4. Its Sobering Conclusions

Like a riddle with a hidden answer, Ecclesiastes leads the reader through a maze of observations before landing on its conclusion:

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NKJV).

The meaning of life is not found in wealth, pleasure, wisdom, or work alone—but in reverence for God and obedience to His Word.

Practical Application

Ecclesiastes reminds us that life without God will always feel like a riddle with no solution. Wealth, success, or pleasure may satisfy for a moment, but they cannot answer the deepest questions of the human heart. Only when we see life from above the sun—in relationship with God—do the pieces fit together.

When life feels confusing or meaningless, we can take comfort that God has already acknowledged our struggles in this book. He invites us to wrestle honestly with life's questions but not to stop there. Like Solomon, we are called to arrive at the clear answer: *Fear God, obey Him, and trust that He alone gives meaning to life.*

When Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs his relationship with God was rock solid and without compromise. However as he grew older he began to compromise and yield to temptation and sin. For example, God taught that a good leader must be content with the family situation God has given him. Deuteronomy 17:17 gives a direct warning about kings in Israel: “Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself” (NKJV). The danger was clear—an unchecked appetite for relationships or possessions would pull a leader's heart away from loyalty to the Lord.

History confirms the warning. King Solomon, though blessed with wisdom beyond any man of his day, disregarded this command. Scripture records that he had “*seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart*” (1 Kings 11:3, NKJV). Instead of leading Israel to greater devotion, his divided affections led him into idolatry and compromise and eventually weakened the kingdom.

Practical Application

This principle still applies today. Leadership is not only about skill or wisdom—it is about guarding the heart. If a leader cannot exercise contentment and self-control in his closest relationships, he is vulnerable to spiritual drift. The temptations may not be multiple wives in our context, but they can be just as dangerous: unchecked desires, misplaced affections, or compromises in personal integrity.

For each of us, whether we lead a family, a workplace, or a ministry, the question is the same: *Am I content with what God has given me, or am I restless for more?* Discontentment can open the door to compromise, but contentment keeps us steady in our devotion to the Lord. As Paul wrote, “*Godliness with contentment is great gain*” (1 Timothy 6:6, NKJV).

True leadership begins at home and in the heart. If we cultivate faithfulness and contentment there, we will be better equipped to lead others with integrity and strength.

Remember, by the time Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes he had turned away from the Lord and was tasting the futility and emptiness of life lived apart from God. In this book, Solomon speaks from two perspectives: he declares that life without God is ultimately meaningless, yet he also urges us to find joy in the daily blessings of living in obedience to God. It may be that he is reflecting on his

present state of compromise and comparing it with the richer, fuller life he once knew when he walked faithfully with God.

Solomon introduces himself as “the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecclesiastes 1:1, NKJV). The title *Preacher* is significant. In Hebrew, the word is *Qoheleth*, meaning “one who calls together” or “one who gathers an assembly.” It conveys the idea of someone addressing a congregation, not simply speaking to himself. The Greek word *ekklesiastēs*—from which we derive the book’s title—carries a similar sense: “one who convenes an assembly.” Various translations bring out shades of this meaning, calling him a convener, assembler, spokesman, debater, or preacher. At its core, the word suggests a man who speaks truth before a gathered people.

We are also told he was “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” While the phrase *son of David* could, in a broad sense, refer to any descendant of David, the immediate and natural understanding is Solomon himself. Verse 12 reinforces this: “I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.” Solomon was uniquely positioned as David’s direct son who reigned over the united kingdom of Israel from Jerusalem. Later kings of David’s line ruled only over Judah, while kings of the northern kingdom reigned from Shechem or Samaria, never from Jerusalem. Thus, the internal evidence points most clearly to Solomon as the author.

Practical Application

It is worth pausing here to see the importance of how Solomon identifies himself. He doesn’t begin with his wisdom, wealth, or accomplishments. Instead, he begins with his role before God and before the people: a *preacher*—a man charged with calling others to listen to truth. Titles like king, ruler, or scholar might impress the world, but Solomon chose to frame himself as one who proclaims God’s perspective on life.

For us, this is a reminder that our identity is not found in our achievements, possessions, or positions of influence. Ultimately, our calling is to be bearers of truth—to share God’s wisdom with those around us, whether in formal teaching or in everyday conversations. Like Solomon, we are invited to see ourselves not primarily as consumers of life, but as conveyors of what God has taught us.

So the question is: how do I view myself today? Am I primarily concerned with what I can *gain* from life, or am I available to be God’s voice to others, pointing them to the wisdom found in Him?

The book of Ecclesiastes begins:

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

The “Preacher” here is Solomon, who speaks not as a prophet declaring divine revelation, but as a wise man wrestling with life’s meaning. The Hebrew word translated *Preacher* (*Qoheleth*) could also mean “debater,” “searcher,” or “gatherer.” In Ecclesiastes, Solomon examines life “under the sun”—life considered purely from the human perspective, apart from God’s direct intervention.

His opening words are startling:

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

The word “*vanity*” here means vapor, breath, or that which disappears. Solomon concludes at the start what he later proves: that when life is lived only for this world, it is fleeting, frustrating, and ultimately empty.

The Problem: Life Without the Spiritual Dimension

Solomon observes that man, when seen only as a body and mind, is no more than a highly developed animal. His bodily drives—hunger, thirst, sexuality, survival—push him forward. His mind hungers for meaning, love, and security. Yet apart from the spiritual connection with God, these needs remain unsatisfied.

This is why people chase achievement, wealth, knowledge, and pleasure—yet feel a haunting emptiness. Our culture confirms Solomon’s words. Many today are materially comfortable, yet restless, anxious, and unfulfilled. Some drown their dissatisfaction in entertainment, addictions, or endless busyness. Others retreat into isolation or despair. In every case, the result is the same: without God, life is cyclical, wearying, and ultimately unsatisfying.

The Cycles of Life

Solomon describes these cycles:

- **Generations come and go** (v. 4).
- **The sun rises and sets** (v. 5).
- **The wind circles endlessly** (v. 6).
- **Rivers run to the sea, yet the sea is never full** (v. 7).

Life under the sun seems repetitive, monotonous, and without lasting progress. People strive, but the world remains the same. In Solomon’s words:

“The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

Technology may advance, empires may rise and fall, but the human heart remains restless. There is *“nothing new under the sun”* (v. 9).

The Limits of Human Wisdom

Solomon himself was a man of extraordinary wisdom. He pursued knowledge, explored pleasure, and examined life with unmatched resources. Yet his conclusion was sobering:

“I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:17–18).

Human wisdom, while valuable, cannot solve the deepest hunger of the soul. Information without transformation leaves us weary. Knowledge without God magnifies our awareness of life’s brokenness but provides no remedy. The flesh is never satisfied.

The Hope Beyond the Sun

Though Ecclesiastes paints a picture of despair, it also points us to the deeper truth: life cannot be understood or fulfilled apart from God. The cycles, frustrations, and emptiness under the sun reveal our need for what is **above the sun**—a relationship with the Creator.

Jesus addressed this need directly:

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37–38).

Only when our spiritual dimension is restored—when we are reconnected to God through Christ—does life gain true meaning. Our labor, wisdom, and even our simple joys then take on eternal purpose.

Practical Application

1. **Recognize the limits of “life under the sun.”** Career, wealth, pleasure, and knowledge can be blessings, but they cannot fill the deepest void in your soul.
2. **Avoid escapism.** Many people run to distractions—alcohol, endless scrolling, compulsive work, physical pleasure—trying to silence the emptiness. Solomon reminds us: these roads end in futility.
3. **Seek God’s perspective.** Ask: *Am I only living for what is under the sun, or am I aligning my life with what is above the sun?*
4. **Let Christ quench your thirst.** The dissatisfaction you feel is not a flaw to be medicated away—it is a signal pointing you to God. Christ alone satisfies the spirit, turning emptiness into overflow.

In short: Ecclesiastes 1 teaches us that life without God is a weary cycle of vanity. But life with God is a fountain of purpose, peace, and joy.