

From: Ecclesiastes (Knowing the Bible) Author: Justin S. Holcomb, Crossway

For Week 1 Materials: Please see the document emailed Wednesday, January 19, 2022

WEEK 2: - January 27, 2022 (Temporary copy)

## ALL IS VANITY

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

### The Place of the Passage

Ecclesiastes begins with “All is vanity” (1:2) and ends with the same declaration (12:8). The Preacher says that everything is meaningless without a proper focus on God. This theme is established and explained in 1:4–11, with verse 4 providing the thesis: “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” People are temporary, but the earth is lasting. Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 gives examples of systems or aspects of the earth that demonstrate this truth. Verses 5 and 6 establish two central metaphors<sup>1</sup> that run through the rest of the book: the wind and the sun. They appear throughout the book in the phrases “striving after wind” and “under the sun.” These metaphors emphasize two things: the lasting significance of the earth, and humanity’s ephemeral nature by comparison. People would like to do something new, to be remembered for making a significant contribution to the world; they long and strive for lasting significance but cannot attain it (vv. 8–10). Our efforts are like striving after the wind—attempts for immortality that inevitably fail. One cannot catch the wind—it is here one minute and gone the next, just as fleeting as a human lifespan. All that is done “under the sun” suffers the same fate. We labor under the sun but will never have the significance or impact that it has. No matter how great their accomplishments, humans will not achieve the lasting significance they desire. Ecclesiastes 1:11 drives home this conclusion. The Big Picture This section of Ecclesiastes declares the vanity of everything and the denial of meaning or satisfaction in life, in and of itself. Reflection and Discussion Read through the complete passage for this study, Ecclesiastes 1:1–11. Then review the questions below concerning this section of Ecclesiastes and write your notes on them.

1. Who is the Preacher, and why is he significant?
2. In Ecclesiastes 1:2, the Preacher (Hebrew Qoheleth) twice employs the phrase “vanity of vanities.” The Hebrew term translated here, *hebel*, can refer to vanity, breath, mist, or meaninglessness and is used more than 30 times in Ecclesiastes. What does this phrase picture?
3. At the end of verse 2, the Preacher indicates, “All is vanity.” Looking at the rest of chapter 1, why would the Preacher make this statement?

4. In verse 3 the Preacher asks, “What gain is toil?” This question is repeated in various ways throughout Ecclesiastes (3:9; 5:15; 6:11; 10:11). Why is the Preacher questioning the significance of people’s work and asserting the pointlessness of life and creation? Should his pronouncements cause us to despair?

5. Verse 11 says that few people make any significant impact on the course of world history, while most lie and die in obscurity. How does verse 11 drive home the point introduced in verse 4 and reinforced throughout these poetic verses?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole Bible Connections* and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the Personal *Implications* these sections may have for you.

### Gospel Glimpses

LONGING FOR GRACE. This passage highlights the futility of life and creation that we all feel. Due to the tyranny of time that erodes and replaces all that distinguishes human accomplishment, our work can be summarized as “nothing new” (v. 9) and nothing remembered (v. 11). There is a cyclical, rhythmic element to creation that appears futile. Seasons always change. The streams continue to flow, though the ocean never fills. Generations come and go and repeat the mistakes of the past. Meanwhile, the earth stands still and mocks any idea of progress. The passage evokes a longing for grace<sup>2</sup> and meaning. This blanket observation of the futility of human accomplishment makes the heart long for the stark contrast of Jesus’ work for, in, and through us that is new and will be forever remembered. When we come to believe in Jesus—partaking of the new covenant<sup>3</sup> that gives new birth, new life, and a new commandment—we enter into a new workforce. Now what we do matters, as it is done for the sake of the gospel<sup>4</sup> and the glory of God (e.g., Matt. 25:40; 26:10–13). In Christ, our labor is not in vain (Psalm 112; 1 Cor. 15:58).

### ULTIMATE AND LASTING SATISFACTION.

Ultimate and lasting satisfaction is found only in Christ and in enjoying God’s gifts through him (Rev. 22:17). Apart from the mystery of our union with Jesus, even the best gifts of creation will fail us. If we neglect God in our pursuit of joy, everything good in life—e.g., health, possessions, sensual pleasures—slips through our grasp or fails to satisfy. But if we see that what we have is God’s provision and give “thanks to God the Father”—ultimately through Christ (Col. 3:17)—for all his gifts, then whatever we receive from him is seen as a gift that brings true joy—joy in God. In Jesus’ words, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Our labor in the Lord has meaning even when it doesn’t feel like it: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

## Whole-Bible Connections

### FUTILITY.

Because of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden, creation has been placed under the curse of the fall (Rom. 8:20–21). For Adam in particular, the ground he was charged with cultivating would instead produce thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17–18). This theme of futility can be traced throughout Scripture, as "futility" can characterize nearly anything pursued apart from God. Without God, our thoughts and attitudes are futile (Ps. 94:11; Isa. 16:6; Jer. 48:29–30; Luke 1:51–52; Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:17–18). Without God, our work is futile (Pss. 39:6; 127:1–2; Hab. 2:13; James 1:11). Without God, our religious activities are futile (1 Kings 18:29; 2 Kings 17:15; Isa. 1:13; 16:12; Jer. 10:5; Acts 5:36–38; Col. 2:20–23). Even Christian religious activities can be futile apart from God (John 15:5; 1 Cor. 3:12–15; Titus 3:9; Heb. 4:2; James 1:22–24). Without God, even our very lives are futile (Job 7:6–7; 14:1–2; Pss. 39:4–5; 89:47; Isa. 40:6–7; James 4:14). Ultimately, God wants to deliver us from the futility that pervades our lives (2 Tim. 2:21; 1 Pet. 1:18), and eventually, he will succeed in doing so by bringing his presence to earth as completely as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). Then, nothing will be done in futility, for nothing will be done apart from God's loving presence in all of glorified human life.

LIFE AS A VAPOR. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were subjected to death and decay as a result of the fall. In Genesis 4, their firstborn son, Cain, kills their second-born, Abel. Abel, whose name in Hebrew, *hebel*, is in fact the word for vanity in Ecclesiastes, is born and dies within 6 verses. His life is but a vapor, a breath exhaled on a cold morning. In Genesis 5, the pace picks up and we rapidly meet men who have sons, grow old, and die—vapor after vapor after vapor. Human mortality is established early on in Genesis.

THE DAVIDIC KING. Ecclesiastes begins with the Preacher described as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem." In Genesis 1:28 we learn that humanity was entrusted with the royal task of "subduing" and having "dominion over" all creation. After Adam, our first king, failed in this calling, God promised that a true and better king would come to conquer evil and restore humanity's rule over the earth. To Abraham and Sarah, God promised, "Kings shall come from you" (Gen. 17:6, 16). This promise was narrowed to Judah's line (Gen. 49:10) and eventually to the line of David (2 Sam. 7:12–16). The hope is sustained with the promise of a son who will rule "on the throne of David and over his kingdom" (Isa. 9:6–7). This points forward to the coming of Jesus, the son of David, who is now enthroned "far above all rule and authority" (Eph. 1:20–21) and who "shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

### Theological Soundings

### HUMAN MORTALITY.

In this passage, mortality is decreed by God (see Gen. 3:19; 6:3; Ps. 90:3, 5) and is universal (Eccles. 3:20; 1 Cor. 15:22). Whether we like it or not, death is inevitable (2 Sam. 14:14; Job 30:23; Rom. 6:23)

and, because of the fall, it is a judgment from God (Rom. 5:12–19; Heb. 9:27). But, much like futility, death is neither an original nor a permanent feature of human life. Because mortality was ultimately conquered at the cross (1 Cor. 15:51–57), our future dwelling with God will last for eternity (John 11:25–26; 2 Tim. 1:9–10; 1 John 5:11–12; Rev. 22:3–5).

#### THE REGULARITIES OF GOD’S PROVIDENCE.

In Genesis 8:22, God promises Noah, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” In other words, because of God’s promises, we can expect the natural world to exhibit certain regularities. This dependable nature of the created order gives a rational basis for scientific endeavor and experimentation—two parts hydrogen plus one part oxygen always produces water. And, we can plan our daily activities, knowing that the sun will always rise at its divinely appointed time. Thus, while Ecclesiastes describes these regularities as an example of the vanity of existence, they are also examples of God’s grace even amid his judgment. Though he subjected creation to futility (Rom. 8:20–22), he still upholds the regularities of nature so that human beings can depend on them, making rational day-to-day existence possible.

#### THIS AGE AND THE AGE TO COME.

In these first eleven verses of Ecclesiastes, we see a picture of what life is like in this present age. This is signaled by the phrase “under the sun.” This phrase does not indicate a “secular” point of view, as is often claimed (the Preacher’s frequent references to God exclude such an interpretation), but rather refers to the world and to mankind in its current fallen state, much like the New Testament expression “this present age” (1 Tim. 6:17; see also Rom. 8:18; Eph. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:10). Because the age to come has broken into the present age by the dawning of the new creation in Christ, there is a tension. On the one hand, life is still very much like Ecclesiastes describes it. On the other hand, we have been given new life through the Spirit and thus we await a full removal of the old as we live in the “overlap” of the new.

#### Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the

(1) Gospel Glimpses

(2) Whole-Bible Connections

(3) Theological Soundings

### **As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Ecclesiastes. Ang take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some things that the Lord may be teaching you and perhaps to highlight and underlines these things to review again in the future.

### **Definitions**

Metaphor– A figure of speech that draws an analogy between two objects by equating them, even though they are not actually the same thing. An example is Psalm 119:105: Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Grace- Unmerited favor, especially the free gift of salvation that God gives to believers through faith in Jesus Christ.

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Covenant – A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship, a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. The OT is more properly understood as the old covenant, meaning the agreement established between God and his people prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant (NT).

Gospel – A common translation for a Greek word meaning “good news”, that is, the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation he made possible by his burial, and resurrection.