

Ecclesiastes¹

The Words of the Preacher

Lesson 1
Ecclesiastes Chapters 1 - 3

The Preacher

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

The writer identifies himself as the "Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." The word "Preacher" is a feminine noun in Hebrew and means "a teacher of gathered thoughts." However, this teacher's thoughts are not random by any means; they record a carefully thought out message. This teacher is Solomon, the son of David, who serves as the king in Jerusalem when he writes these words. In his last years of life, Solomon looks back to record for all time what it is like to return from the broken godless world to the God of life. Solomon, the Preacher or Teacher, gathers everything he had learned as he lived without God for years in the world's folly and he now suffers from the shame, disappointment and disgrace associated with his choices. Although he should have been close to God, he had chosen to live and reign as king with God down in the Temple that he built while he did as he pleased in the world outside the Temple. He is now old and the lessons he learned through life have now revisited him and he realizes that most endeavors in life are meaningless, worthless and without purpose. He begins by telling how a man without God in his life thinks as he journeys day after day through the godless world. Solomon's purpose is to lead the reader through the depths of despair we experience when living without God. He ends the message by telling us what life can be with God, especially if those days begin in our youth rather than at the end of life.

All is Vanity

Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Today, we would say, "Meaningless of meaningless! All is meaningless." Solomon begins by saying that nothing in this life has true meaning, nor is anything really important in the big scheme of life. Sum it all up and you will get nothing but an empty feeling, a disappointed heart, a hungry soul, heartache and the worthless result that culminates in a pointless, futile, fruitless, and unsuccessful outcome. It is the ultimate outcome of living life on earth!

What Advantage?

Ecclesiastes 1:3 What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? ⁴A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there *again*. ⁶Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns. ⁷All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. ⁸All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing. ⁹That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun.

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It is Solomon's conclusion that the physical world and all it contains will continue to do what it does day after day forever, regardless of what man does on earth. Work, work, work is man's task and it is nothing by a wearisome activity that provides for the basic needs but brings no true satisfaction. Furthermore, there is nothing more to do since it all has been done in the past by others and will be done again in the future by newcomers. The sun in the sky has seen it all before and will see it all again.

No Remembrance

Ecclesiastes 1:10 Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has existed for ages which were before us. ¹¹ There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later *still*.

Solomon explains how every generation of people make the same mistakes, never learning from those of the past generations. They come up with something that they think is new and give it a name, but it is not new, it just has a different name. The mistakes of the 1960's resurfaced in the 1980's and the 2000's. The mistakes of the 1970's resurfaced in the 1990's and 2010's. Every other generation of new leaders pushes the pendulum of thought to the other side, thinking they are doing some new and different in rebellion to the status quo; yet, they have only re-invented the wheel cast two generations before and gave it a different name. The result is the same, and so the pendulum of thought continues to swing through generation after generation. Very few learn from the past.

A Grievous Task

Ecclesiastes 1:12 I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. ¹⁴ I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. ¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. ¹⁶ I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. ¹⁸ Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.

As an old man, Solomon has decided to catalog all the activities of man, hoping that his endeavors will make the crooked ways straight and that wisdom will increase so people will not make the same mistakes. The more Solomon explores the endeavors of man, the more grievous the task becomes. Solomon realizes that man cannot straighten his crooked paths and he falls so short that his inability cannot be measured. Solomon was granted wisdom from God, but that wisdom plagued Solomon by showing him the general madness and folly of man. It is as foolish as trying to chase the wind. The more the Preacher catalogs the works of man, the more he is afflicted with the pain of grief for man.

Test of Pleasure – What I Did

Ecclesiastes 2:1 I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility. ² I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?" ³ I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. ⁴ I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; ⁵ I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; ⁶ I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female

slaves, and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. ⁸ Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men— many concubines. ⁹ Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. ¹⁰ And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

In Solomon's search for pleasure, he had tried just about everything, except God. He sought out wine, built houses, gardens and parks. He planted fruit trees and dug ponds. He owned slaves, flocks, herds, silver, gold, male and female singers and many wives. He obtained everything that he wanted and could imagine, all for the sake of exploring pleasure. What was his reward for such tasks? Personal pride was his reward, not the pride of others for him.

Test of Pleasure – What I Learned

Ecclesiastes 2:11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun. ¹² So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? ¹³ And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. ¹⁴ The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. ¹⁵ Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." ¹⁶ For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man *as* with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!

What did Solomon learn from his test of pleasure? His gift of wisdom revealed to him that all he had accomplished was meaningless under the sun. His wisdom actually propelled him from meaningless acts to more meaningless acts. His wisdom in testing pleasure led him further down the path of foolishness. Solomon could have built houses of gold over the entire world but his fate would be as that of the man who built a simple tent for his home; both will die one day. Solomon says, "Why did I work so hard to acquire so much?" He realizes that generations later, few will know of all the hard work that Solomon performed to gain so much because most of it will decay and be gone in a few years.

Test of Pleasure – What I Thought

Ecclesiastes 2:17 So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind. ¹⁸ Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.

Solomon hates the man he had been in the early years. The possessions he had striven so hard to obtain are now possessing him and all his time and energy and for what purpose? He had chased the wind and caught nothing. He now has "stuff," but who will take care of it when he dies? A wise man could take care of it for a generation but who will take care of it then. If a fool is left in charge, all of Solomon's hard work will have been for nothing. Solomon concludes that all his past labors were meaningless.

Test of Pleasure – What I Realized

Ecclesiastes 2:20 Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. ²¹ When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. ²² For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

Solomon's conclusion brings him to a point of complete despair. Perhaps if he had let someone experience the ups and downs of the ventures with him along the way, that person could continue to take care of what he will leave behind at death. It is too late for that because everything is built and Solomon is too old to sufficiently train someone. The task of cataloging the events of testing pleasure led from one folly to another and every night he could not sleep, obsessive and compulsive about the tasks of tomorrow. They were just building projects and for all practical purposes, they were meaningless in light of eternity.

Test of Pleasure – What I Contrived

Ecclesiastes 2:24 There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? ²⁶ For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.

At the end of the day, the man who seeks such pleasure and finds it only in eating and drinking is attempting to convince himself that what he has accomplished is not meaningless, but good. Finally, Solomon inserts a concept of God into the story. He says that joy can come from man's labors when God is involved, but when God is not involved, the sinner's labors are nothing but meaningless acts of chasing the wind. Sometimes that which is gathered in labor is passed on to those who waste it and sometimes it is passed on to the Godly who will use it for God's purposes. Either way, foolishness will eventually prevail and all will be meaningless. Solomon's conclusion has led him to complete despair.