

Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes  
Ecclesiastes 1:1-15  
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Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-15

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* (Isaiah 40:8)

Welcome to the book of Ecclesiastes! Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, claimed that, "this book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered." R.N. Whybray, a Hebrew scholar and Anglican priest said, "Two thousand years of interpretation... have utterly failed to solve the enigma." Well, you've probably heard the expression, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." That might be a good description of me taking on this book to preach for the next 3 months. There are parts of this book that I am bewildered by, parts that I disagree with, and parts that seem repetitive, counter-intuitive, or just puzzling. In fact, listen to Douglas Sean O'Donnell's description: "Ecclesiastes is like a thousand-piece puzzle taken from the box, thrown on the floor, and kicked around by the kids. But... lay them on a clean table, and slowly, humbly, and prayerfully piece the pieces together, a clear picture emerges."<sup>1</sup> How many of you actually like to do 1,000 piece puzzles? I don't. I'm nowhere near patient enough for them, so this should be an adventure, right?

Before we start into the text, let's get a little bit of an introduction. Names are always significant. The word Ecclesiastes is a longer form of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means gathering, assembly, even church. The narrator calls himself in Hebrew *Qoholeth*, which in Greek is *Ecclesiastes*, which means "one who speaks to the congregation." So our English translations call him the Preacher or the Teacher, or they don't translate it and just use the Hebrew Qoheleth. Some interpreters prefer to call him "The Seeker," because he has gone ahead and sought out all the different ways that we try to find satisfaction and meaning in life, and he tends to agree with Mick Jagger: "Though I try, though I try, I can't get no satisfaction." The author is like a tour guide who has experienced it all and wants to warn us that we will probably come to the same conclusions even if we don't have as much wisdom, wealth, and experience as he does.

For most of church history, it was assumed that Solomon wrote the book, even though that name is not used in the text. Some scholars have challenged this based on the language used, but their arguments are not completely convincing, and when the book starts with the "*son of David... I have been King over Israel in Jerusalem,*" there's only one person who fits that description, Solomon. Furthermore, the description of his lifestyle and acquiring great wisdom and unbelievable wealth proves it even more. The only other option is that someone has written pretending to be Solomon, but the burden of proof is on those who would challenge Solomon's authorship.<sup>2</sup> If we agree that Solomon was the author, then the place and the time of writing is somewhat easily identified as Jerusalem and sometime in the 930s BC. Some scholars think that Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his middle life, and Ecclesiastes in his old age, which I think is a fascinating idea. No way to prove that, or even that Solomon wrote it for sure, but for our purposes, I will be referring to Solomon as the author, because it feels more personal than saying "the Preacher" or "Qoheleth." If you want to put an asterisks in your mind every time I say that, that's OK.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2014), p. 4, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2019), pp. 1-10.

Let's be reminded of Solomon's IQ, his brilliance, from an incident early in his life in 1 Kings 3:5-14: *"5 At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." 6 And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. 7 And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. 9 Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" 10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. 11 And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, 12 behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. 13 I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. 14 And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."*

That's fascinating. Solomon could have asked for anything. But he recognized how unprepared he was to be king, how unequipped he was to handle ruling over a huge multitude of people, so he asked for an "understanding mind," for wisdom. God was so pleased by that that He gave Him wisdom and threw in all the other stuff he didn't ask for: riches and honor. 1 Kings 10 says that silver was considered nothing in Solomon's day because everything was overlaid with the finest gold. And lastly, verse 14, a conditional promise to lengthen his days if he kept God's commandments. If you have studied Solomon's life in 1 Kings or 2 Chronicles, you know that he eventually married over 700 wives who turned his heart away from the Lord, so he fell way short in the obedience department, but not in the intelligence, riches, or accomplishment departments.

I want to talk about this book in terms of being one of the 66 inspired books of Scripture. As we read it, we will see a lot of things that are true from the point of view of man and earth but not necessarily true from the point of view of God and heaven. That's why Solomon says "*under the sun*" or "*under heaven*" continually, because his thoughts are of a human being reflecting on life. Does that mean that this book is not inspired in the same way that the Gospels or Paul's letters were written under the inspiration of God? No, we believe that Holy Spirit inspired Solomon, as He did all the writers of Scripture, but that does not mean that God gave all the heavenly answers. He allowed Solomon to wrestle with the difficult questions from a human perspective, he was allowed to come to angry and frustrated conclusions without wrapping up every chapter with a verse like, "but the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds."

One of the main themes of Ecclesiastes is despair. It can read like someone who is off their medication or is just a good old-fashioned pessimist, but just remember the old saying, "A pessimist is a realist with experience." Some people have lumped this book in with the philosophy of nihilism – the idea that everything is meaningless, and therefore we must reject objective truth and traditional values. Sometimes Solomon can even sound like an atheist. I don't think that, ultimately, Ecclesiastes embodies any of those things, but it certainly touches on them. And since our culture is moving towards those ideas (if not embracing them outright), we'll be seeing lots of parallels. We might have to work hard to see where there is redemption and meaning amidst the despair.

Now at this point, let me do a little bit of reading your minds. Maybe you're thinking something like, "Pastor Dave, uh, have you not been aware of everything that's been going on in the world and America in the past year and a half? We've got the whole despair thing down, we're actually in the middle of some pretty depressing things with a bunch of natural disasters hitting, racial tension, angry political rants from all sides, a second wave of COVID hitting close to home. WHY? Why are we reading the most pessimistic book in the Bible? Why don't you just give us paper cuts and pour lemon juice on them? Can't we read the encouraging, uplifting Psalms and turn our frowns upside down?" To which, I'll respond, "Good points. But maybe, just maybe, instead of trying to avoid our difficult feelings; instead of trying to stuff our doubts and laments and covering them up with happy thoughts, perhaps God has a lot waiting for us on the other side of our wrestling. Maybe we need to wade into the hard, the discouraging, the perplexing, and the infuriating to find some answers or at the very least find God wading in there with us." Someone in our church told me once that "I thought becoming a Christian would be like skipping in a field of daisies with Jesus, but it was the opposite." Life is hard, even as a Christian, let's not pretend it's anything else. One commentator, David Gibson, reminds us that this book is describing what "the world is like. It's reality. It's the same for everyone, Christian or non-Christian, adherent or atheist: we each live under the sun... Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true."<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes draws us into the complexities, the ambiguities, the absurdities, the ugliness, both also the beauty.

So let's get dark and depressing. Our first three verses plunge us right into it, reminding us that **I. Life Can Seem Fleeting and Unrewarding (vv. 1-3)**

<sup>1</sup> *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* <sup>2</sup> *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.* <sup>3</sup> *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

One of the first things we need to settle is what the Hebrew word *hebel* (pronounced hevel) means. It's used 38 times in the book. It's the word that the ESV, the King James, and others translate as "vanity." The NIV translates it as "meaningless" and some of the paraphrased Bibles say "useless," "pointless," or "futile." In other OT books, *hebel* is used for "breath" or "breeze": Psalm 39:11 says "*Surely all mankind is a mere hebel/breath*" and Proverbs 31:30 says "*Charm is deceptive and beauty is hebel/fleeting.*" Vanity is not so much describing the person who is always checking themselves out in the mirror; it is to be understood as short and elusive.<sup>4</sup> On a freezing cold day, breathe out and you can see your breath. But then try to catch your breath. You can't, and that's what life is like: there for a minute but fleeting, unable to be grasped, lacking real substance.

When our family took our vacation to Lake Michigan in May, one of the small beach towns we stopped in was St. Joseph. Kath and I went to dinner somewhat late in the day and when we stepped out of the restaurant we saw an amazing sunset over the ocean. But we were a few blocks from the ocean, so we started hurrying to catch it and get a picture. But by the time we got to the beach, the sun had already set enough that it was not as brilliant as it had been. And getting a picture of it, while it was beautiful, did not do justice to what we first saw. That's **hebel!** The frustration of trying to catch something that is fleeting. Our lives are like a sunset that blazes very quickly but sets too soon and after it's gone, everything moves on as though it never happened and no one noticed. James 4:14 says something similar: "*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*" Solomon will describe pleasure, youth, success, wealth, desire, popularity, and the fruits of our labors as *hebel*, temporary, fleeting breaths.

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<sup>3</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), pp. 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 19-20.

We will see verse 3 repeated in different forms throughout the book, this rhetorical question of what we gain by all our toil. The next 8 verses essentially give the answer: “nothing.”

## **II. Life Can Seem Repetitive and Redundant (vv. 4-11)**

*<sup>4</sup>A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. <sup>5</sup>The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. <sup>6</sup>The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. <sup>7</sup>All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. <sup>8</sup>All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. <sup>9</sup>What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. <sup>10</sup>Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. <sup>11</sup>There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.*

Solomon invites us to look around at all of these cycles of nature: the sun rising and setting, the wind blowing on a circuit, the life cycle of water, people being born and dying. All of that happens, but what ultimately gets achieved? Nothing. You just start the cycle over and over again. It’s like the old story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology: he was punished by the god Hades with having to continually roll a boulder up a steep hill only to watch it roll back down again. He was trapped in that cycle of futile actions, and Solomon says that that’s how the earth is set up.

So I guess the question is: Do those endless cycles make us depressed that they never really achieve anything new, and they just continue with no break? Or do we appreciate and count on those cycles to always be there, so we can plan around them? Imagine if every night the sun went down, we all got very anxious and pleaded with it to come back up the next day because sometimes it rose in the morning and sometimes it didn’t. That would make it very hard to plan your days around. But God gave us the assurance that the days and seasons would continue in Genesis 8:22, which is right after the flood in Noah’s day: “*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.*” So in Genesis, this promise is very comforting. In Ecclesiastes, that promise takes on a depressing, trapped feel.

We all have cycles in our lives. The endless need to do laundry and dishes feels pointless when you get everything clean but have to run a new load two days later. Those two or three weeks of summer vacation can be a wonderful break, but also remind us that we are constantly working the rest of the year. Where does this all get us? Verse 8 – we’re worn out and unsatisfied, “*all things are full of weariness.*” The Contemporary English Version translates that verse bluntly: “*All of life is far more boring than words could ever say.*” Again, the question is: are we on a hamster wheel running through the cycles for no reason, or will we see that the natural rhythms and cycles of our lives actually add meaning and selective rest and change that help us to continue on? Certainly, if you don’t appreciate the cycles, you’ll despair. Another way to say it is that if you don’t like the idea of human beings being finite creatures who can only operate within our boundaries; that we are not in control, we will not live forever. It’s almost as if wisdom comes when we realize that we live in a world created by someone else.

Verse 9 has that phrase that will be popping up over and over: “*there is nothing new under the sun.*” Human beings are wired the same way we always have been, so there will always be rulers and governments and wars and love and fashion and economic trading systems; even if they change names and faces, they are the same at their root. I heard someone recently say, “Yeah, that’s mostly true, but man, the internet, that was truly a new thing under the sun.” Was it? I mean, it’s certainly

a revolutionary tool that no one before the 1960s probably could have even imagined. But I want you to **look at a graphic I found**. I don't remember where I got it, but it's a graphic showing all of these major Internet and social media companies and how they feed the 7 deadly sins: Tinder feeds our Lust, Yelp is for Gluttony, LinkedIn is for Greed, Netflix feeds our Sloth, Twitter our wrath, Facebook our Envy, and Instagram our Pride. Now obviously, you can use those websites, those apps, for good as well. But I appreciate their point, whoever designed that is a genius. Because, yes, the technology is new, but the human longing behind it isn't.

So Solomon's ultimate point is that because there is nothing truly new, life seems a bit pointless if we're all just following the cycles of nature and the natural rhythms of our lives, but not really accomplishing anything remarkable. Does that resonate with you? Maybe you didn't feel that so much when you were younger because you were excited about everything out there ("the world was your oyster"), but you feel it more and more as you get older, and you feel the emptiness of broken dreams, broken promises, broken relationships. The last four verses remind us that

### **III. Life Can Seem Sad, Broken and Empty (vv. 12-15)**

*<sup>12</sup> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>14</sup> I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is (hebel) vanity and a striving after wind. <sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

These four verses can be seen as a summary of what is to come in the rest of the book. It's not everything that the Preacher will find out, but it's a statement of his intentions at the beginning of his search, as well as his initial impressions of what he will discover: meaning and happiness are hard to find in this crooked, busy world. He was a king, a very rich king, so he could have anything he wanted. And he was the wisest man ever, so he could make the claims "I have seen" and "I have understood" with credibility. The man who had everything and who had achieved everything that he wanted was unsatisfied. He doesn't think that life is uninteresting; on the contrary, he is often fascinated by it and has found enjoyment. But he ultimately has a hard time making sense of it all.

Henry Miller has said that "Life has to be given a meaning because of the obvious fact that it has no meaning."<sup>5</sup> I think all of us would agree that this world is broken, but a broken world doesn't automatically negate all meaning and satisfaction in life. As we read statements like "*it is an unhappy business that God has given*" and "*what is crooked cannot be made straight,*" we have to remember that it wasn't always like that; we have to remember the fall of humanity into sin. The original design of creation was good and acceptable to God – there was nothing crooked or unhappy; the creation account in Genesis says several times "*God saw that it was good.*" There was no sin, no selfishness, no stain on God's creation. Until the day that Adam and Eve directly disobeyed their Creator by eating from the fruit of the tree that God had told them to resist. That was the moment that not only were human beings brought under the curse of the fall, but the creation itself was affected. Paul explains this in Romans 8:20: "*For the creation itself was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.*" The creation is broken, it's feeling the futility, it's groaning as it waits for the redemption of God's eternal kingdom. And so we get the insight that the phrase "*life under the sun*" means life after the

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Miller, "Creative Death," *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 5.

Fall. Life in a broken world ruled by sin, corruption, and futility is broken and it feels like it can never be straightened out or given meaning.

We've got 13 more weeks to work through things and flesh all this out. Whether you enjoy philosophy and want to dive deep into life's hardest questions, or whether you have always shied away from the difficult, disjointed parts of life that don't make sense – I invite you to come with me on this journey through Ecclesiastes. Whether you've been a Christian all your life or have recently become a Christian or are still unsure of whether Christianity (or any religion) have any answers, let's read and wrestle through Ecclesiastes together. Maybe you're cruising along in life and you've got the "Midas touch" – everything you touch turns to gold, everything you do prospers. Or maybe you're coming off a long string of failures. You may be a glass half-empty person, you may be a glass half-full person, you may not even care as long as someone refills it when it is actually empty. Maybe you like easy answers and slogans like, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" or maybe you enjoy the ambiguity and gray areas of life. Either way, join me as we wrestle with this ancient text that is as relevant and fresh today as the day it was written. Ecclesiastes has much to say to us.

➔ *Transition to Communion:* Solomon claims that there is nothing new under the sun. But maybe there is something, or someone, who has broken through to our world and proclaims that "*Behold, I am making all things new.*" And today we come to a table where we celebrate the *new* covenant that He offers us, wherein we recognize and celebrate that He has given us *new* hearts, making us *new* creations. This is both a celebration of what Jesus did 2,000 years ago on the cross, but also a foretaste of the glory of the heavenly banquet that we will celebrate in the *new* heavens and the *new* earth! Apart from Jesus, "we are crushed by that saying 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Only in Christ are we freed from the bondage of vanity and futility."<sup>6</sup>

Benediction - Numbers 6:24-26 - "*The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.*"

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<sup>6</sup> J.V. Fesko, *Where Wisdom is Found: Christ in Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Reformation, 2010), pp. 14-15