

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **All is Vanity: Making Sense of Life Under the Sun**

Have you ever had your expectations utterly shattered? Like, you had these assumptions about how something was going to turn out, and it just blew up in your face? And maybe you didn't even realize that you had these expectations until you see all the broken pieces, and you say to yourself, “This is not the way it's supposed to be.”

As an illustration, imagine that you went to college right out of high school. You knew what you wanted to do for a career, and you had all of these dreams and ambitions. So, you put in the work for four years, graduated, and eventually got hired. You did the “right” thing according to conventional wisdom...but it turns out that you hate your job. And now you are in debt, you aren't paid enough, and you feel unfulfilled. And just to add insult to injury, your boss's nephew, who is way less qualified than you, gets the promotion you deserve. If this were you (and for some of you, this illustration might seem too real!), you would probably feel ripped off, wouldn't you? All that energy, time, and effort you put into school did not give you what you thought it would.

Without even really realizing it, we all have certain expectations that we bring to our lives. Many of these expectations are reasonable and based on wisdom. For instance, “If I do the right thing and if I work hard, I can expect good things to come my way.” It's perfectly reasonable to think that.

In fact, the book of Proverbs is full of this type of wisdom. According to Proverbs 22:6, if you train up your children in the way they should go, they will not depart when they get older. Proverbs 31:28 says that excellent wives will receive praise from their husbands. Proverbs 3:5-8 says that trusting in the Lord and turning away from evil will make your body healthy and give you strong bones. Proverbs 10:27 says that the one who fears the Lord will have a prolonged life.

This is sound wisdom! And we, as believers, receive this wisdom. We try to be diligent in raising our kids right, being a good spouse, and living our lives in fear of the Lord. A big reason we do this is because we recognize that we can expect good things to come our way when we do the right thing and when we work hard.

But then something happens. Your son or daughter grows up and wants nothing to do with you or God. They depart from the values that you raised them with. The husband you loved and served as a faithful “Proverbs 31 wife” does not praise you. In fact, he left you for someone else. You trusted in the Lord your whole life and tried to live a healthy lifestyle, but you’ve been diagnosed with a chronic illness. Someone you know and loved—a good, godly man who feared the Lord—died young and unexpectedly, leaving behind his young family in bitter grief and heartache.

When we see and experience these things, and our expectations about how life is supposed to be are shattered, it’s easy to blame God. “How could you allow this to happen, God? I faithfully served you!” We cry out. Some people even walk away from their faith entirely because they can’t reconcile their expectations with their experiences. It’s jarring when we *still* get burned even though we did everything right.

If righteousness and hard work do not guarantee happiness and prosperity, then what should we do with our lives? Do our lives have any real meaning? What’s the point?

The book of Ecclesiastes addresses this tension between how we might think life should be and how life really is. And it offers us a different way to think about it. Ecclesiastes gives us some wisdom on how we can function, despite all the uncertainty and confusion we experience under the sun.

Let’s dive into some passages from this book and see what we can learn:

### **Ecclesiastes 1:1-2**

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

Who is the preacher, this son of David? Traditionally, he is identified as King Solomon. Regardless, what’s most interesting about the book of Ecclesiastes is that there are *two* people speaking to us. The “preacher” in the book is not actually the same person as the author—he’s *a character* in the narrative. The author, who is anonymous, introduces the preacher in verse 1, and then the preacher takes over for almost the entire rest of the book. That’s why verse 2 reads, “Vanity of vanities *says the Preacher...*” In the last chapter, the preacher’s speech concludes in the same way:

### **Ecclesiastes 12:8**

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*

After the preacher concludes his speech, the book’s author spends a few verses evaluating the preacher’s message (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14). So, regardless of who the preacher is, he is not the author of the book but rather a character. The author introduces this preacher to us, gives him “the floor,” so-to-speak, and then shares some concluding thoughts on the preacher’s message.

Once again, this preacher is a “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” This identification is why the preacher is traditionally understood to be Solomon, perhaps writing in his old age—even though the book never explicitly mentions Solomon. Regardless, the author of the book invites us to examine life from the perspective of this preacher, this “Solomon” character, if you will. As king in Jerusalem, this character has had all the experiences and opportunities one could imagine and is thus able to speak to life’s biggest questions.

So, what is the preacher's central thesis? Well, as we can see in his opening and closing remarks, it is that all is vanity. This word, vanity, is repeated numerous times throughout the book. Other translations render it as "meaningless" or "futility." In Hebrew, the word is *hevel*, which literally means "breath" or "smoke."

The preacher uses this word, *hevel*, as a metaphor to describe life. Life is fleeting, like mist. It's here for a moment and then gone. James captures this idea in his epistle:

**James 4:14**

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

*Hevel* can also mean enigmatic. The preacher describes life as unpredictable and elusive. Like smoke, you can see it—it's there!—but the moment you try to grasp it, it's gone. As soon as you think you have everything figured out, you realize that you don't. Here is a passage that expresses this idea:

**Ecclesiastes 8:14**

There is a **vanity** [*hevel*] that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is **vanity** [*hevel*].

We read this, and we immediately recognize that this isn't the way it should be! Wicked people should get bad results from their bad behavior, and righteous people should get good results from their good behavior! That's justice.

In another passage, the preacher notes that he has seen good people die young and horrible people live long lives:

**Ecclesiastes 7:15**

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.

Once again, we read this and immediately recognize the apparent injustice of it. Shouldn't we expect good people to live long lives? After all, isn't that what Proverbs says?

**Proverbs 10:27**

The fear of the LORD [YHWH] prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.

So, what's going on? Do Ecclesiastes and Proverbs disagree? Well, no, that would be overly simplistic. The book of Proverbs should not be taken as a book of promises. Proverbs speaks to the way life *generally* goes, but the stated outcomes of certain behavior in Proverbs should not be understood as guaranteed. Also, the preacher in Ecclesiastes does admonish us to fear God and live wisely, and he even indicates that life will *generally* be better when we do so (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7; 7:1-13; 8:10-13; 9:13-18; 10:8-20). However, the preacher in Ecclesiastes repeatedly points out that there are no guarantees in life under the sun. While life does work out the way we might expect it should *sometimes*, that isn't always the case. Often wicked people prosper, and righteous people suffer. Justice does not always prevail in our fallen world. The preacher considers this *hevel*—it's an enigma. There is no certainty in it.

Let's keep going:

### **Ecclesiastes 1:3**

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

This phrase “under the sun” is another important phrase consistently used throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. The phrase is basically a reference to life in our fallen world. Throughout his speech, the preacher explains why many of the things we spend our lives caring about and working toward have no lasting meaning in our fallen world. Here is what he says:

### **Ecclesiastes 1:4-11**

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 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. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 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. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

What is the preacher saying here? Basically, time is going to erase everything you’ve ever achieved. Eventually, nobody will remember you or the things you’ve built. The sun rises and sets continually, and everything you’ve done will pass away in time. So, really, what lasting significance does your life have under the sun? It’s all going to be forgotten.

When I was 18 years old, I was in a Christian rock band. This was during the MySpace era. Every band had a MySpace page. That’s just what people used to promote their music. I remember spending countless hours requesting people to follow my band’s MySpace page. Over time, our audience grew significantly.

But then everyone stopped using MySpace. Facebook took over, and MySpace became irrelevant. All that energy I put into building up a MySpace audience for my band came to nothing as time went on. The same thing is going to happen with these newer social media platforms. That TikTok video you made that went viral? Nobody will remember it hundreds of years from now. TikTok won’t even be a thing anymore. It will go the way of “Vines.” What, you don’t remember Vines? Exactly.

We put all our time and energy into things that ultimately will be forgotten. We build successful businesses and careers. We write and publish books. We work to preserve endangered species. We build up a tolerance to spicy foods so that we can eat the world’s hottest pepper and get our picture put on the wall at the famous restaurant. But the sun will still rise and set, and everything you’ve done and cared about will pass away in time. So, what lasting significance do your achievements or social status have under the sun? It’s all going to be forgotten.

This is the way it’s always been, and it holds true even on a larger scale. For instance, people collectively put energy into building entire empires that eventually just pass away. The Persian Empire? It was a powerful empire. It lasted about 200 years. The Persians controlled basically the entire middle east. They were the premier power in the world, like the United States was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But most people today don’t know anything about the Persians. They were conquered by Alexander the Great. And after Alexander the Great’s death, his own empire was then torn apart by a series of civil wars fought between his successors.

Empires rise and fall. Given enough time, even the greatest accomplishments of humanity, individually and collectively, will pass away.

And if that's not depressing enough, the preacher reminds us of another reason that life under the sun has no real, lasting significance: you are going to die.

### **Ecclesiastes 2:14-17**

The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is the preacher saying here? Basically, whether you are wise, foolish, rich, or poor, you are going to die. You can't escape it. Oh, so you're a famous Instagram influencer? Good for you! You're still gonna die. You're a record-holding professional baseball player with countless fans? You share the same fate as everyone else. Death comes for us all.

Within this framework, the preacher examines all the things we put our time and energy into to try to find meaning in life under the sun.

First, he considers pleasure and wealth. The preacher drinks wine, laughs, builds great works, acquires great possessions and riches, and enjoys all the pleasures that life has to offer in hopes he might find some "gain" in it (Ecclesiastes 2:1-8). In the end, however, he found no lasting significance in the pursuit of pleasure:

### **Ecclesiastes 2:9-11**

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

While the preacher found pleasure in his toil—he says it was his "reward"—at the end of the day, there was no genuine "gain" in any of it. This reward itself was not enough to bring lasting fulfillment to life. He is still going to die, and he won't be able to take any of his riches or possessions with him.

Second, the preacher considers wisdom (Ecclesiastes 2:12). But once again, while wisdom does have its benefits (Ecclesiastes 2:13), it ultimately fails to deliver any real, lasting significance. Whether you are wise or foolish, you are still going to die. Nothing is left over after your life ends. Thus, your wisdom cannot offer any real "gain" to your life under the sun.

Third, the preacher considers toil—working hard to build something great and useful. Perhaps *this* can offer some gain beyond death! But once again, this is vanity. This route only leads to working your life away and losing sleep worrying about your work (Ecclesiastes 2:23). Sometimes you don't even get to enjoy the fruit of your labors, and you have to leave it all to someone else who might be a total fool and not even appreciate it (Ecclesiastes 2:18-21).

So, what's the answer? How do we find lasting significance in this life under the sun? Well, as we mentioned earlier, the preacher does admonish us to live according to wisdom and the fear of the Lord. Generally, life will be better. But once again, this is also vanity—*hevel*. Why? Because doing the right thing does not guarantee that you'll have a good life. In fact, there's a strong possibility that your life will get worse. You might even die young while the foolish and wicked live long, comfortable lives. And eventually, we all die anyway, whether righteous or wicked. No matter how good and faithful you are, you will die. Time will move forward, and you'll be forgotten.

Therefore, while we do still live righteously and in accordance with wisdom because that's the life God calls us to, wisdom and fear of the Lord still don't provide genuine "gain" *under the sun*. Life is too unpredictable. All is vanity.

So how do we function amid all this *hevel* under the sun? The preacher's answer is to stop trying to control life and enjoy the good while you have it:

### **Ecclesiastes 5:18-20**

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

You cannot control life—it's *hevel*, unpredictable, fragile, fleeting. Therefore, free yourself from the constant striving after wind and learn to enjoy the good things while you have them. Let go of your expectations about how life *should* be and embrace the life you have. There will be tragedies. You will suffer. Ultimately, you will die. So, make the best of the good times.

If you find a spouse, love them and enjoy them. Laugh about the "darndest" thing your young son or daughter said at dinner. Hang out with your friends and talk about movies. Open that expensive bottle of good wine. And yes, go ahead and write that song or book. Build that bookshelf. Fix up that old car. Do the things that you can find satisfaction in. These good and enjoyable things are not guaranteed in life, and you can't control how long they last—therefore, enjoy them while you have them and receive them for what they are: gifts from God.

But there's still a lingering tension, isn't there? Does this life *have* any meaning beyond enjoying the few good days given to us under the sun? Well, after the preacher gives his speech, the author of Ecclesiastes gives his take on the preacher's message:

### **Ecclesiastes 12:9-14**

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Essentially the author's takeaway is this: the preacher has some good and truthful things to say, but there is something more to keep in mind. That is, even if we can't make sense of certain things that happen in life, that doesn't mean life *has* no meaning. Even though life seems unpredictable and uncertain from our limited perspective, somehow, it all makes sense from God's eternal perspective. We can take comfort in knowing that life *is* meaningful, and what we do *does* matter—just not always in ways we can see. But God *does* see. He brings every deed into judgment. Justice will prevail in the world to come. Therefore, fear God and keep his commandments. He will make everything right in the end.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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