

The Vanity of Life

Introduction:

1. Ecclesiastes can be confusing. **Key:** “The Preacher” is observing life primarily as it appears from an earthly vantage point. **[Note:** I will refer to “the Preacher” as Solomon, though most modern theologians deny his authorship. I consider his identity to be fairly inferred from the evidence in the book.]
2. Leupold calls Solomon’s view of the world a “harsh landscape.” And so it is, from the perspective of human wisdom and achievement. Terms like vanity (39 times), toil, grievous, grasping for wind, no profit, sorrowful, great evil, etc. describe earthly life.
3. Solomon applies himself wholly to the study of human endeavor, wisdom, industry and pleasure. He examines, investigates and probes with deliberate intent to discover the true essence of fulfillment as a human being. His conclusion: Ecc 12:13-14.

1. Cycles of Sameness – Ecc 1:1-11

A. Repetitive cycles characterize earthly life:

1. Generations of man (1:4), sunrise/sunset (1:5), wind (1:6), rivers (1:7) – all ages see these processes. Like a carousel: movement but no real progress.
2. 1:8 – We are never satisfied by our quest for progress, knowledge, improvement of earthly state.

B. There is “nothing new under the sun” (1:9-10).

1. Newness is only apparent: one only need read history, visit museums, peruse old catalogs and newspapers to realize how unchanged things are.
2. Each generation has its “breakthrough” discoveries, but they never ultimately solve the problems of life. Actually, man’s great achievements tend to contribute to our problems (Example: splitting the atom).

C. No remembrance (1:11). Of all the *billions* of humans who have ever lived, whose words can be quoted? A few of Lincoln’s? Jefferson’s? Only the greatest of men who presided over significant events/changes – and then only a few items of their lives – are remembered. Most humans go to oblivion when they die.

2. The Crooked Cannot Be Straightened – Ecc 1:12-18

A. 1:13 – Life is summarized as a “grievous task” given by God. This is not as it was

in Eden but has become so by sin. Life is full of weariness, frustration, pain; it takes constant effort to provide for ourselves. We live among sinful people doing horrible things. We can suffer accident or disease through no fault of our own.

B. 1:15 – The crooked cannot be straightened. **Illustration:** A bent piece of silverware; a wrinkled piece of paper. It is impossible to make things in this world perfect.

C. 1:18 – The more we learn, the more complex are the problems, inequities, injustices of this world. “Experts” may know more than laymen in their respective fields but no one ultimately masters his subject. **Illustration:** Christian Barnard recently died. He pioneered heart transplants in South Africa. His expertise made him an international celebrity, but his advances have been far surpassed by others.

3. Testing the Meaning of Life by Experience – Ecc 2:1-11

A. Background of Solomon’s wealth – 1 Kgs 10:21-29. Solomon *had it all!*

B. Various tests:

1. Solomon “had fun” and indulged in every frivolous entertainment, exhilaration and adventure (2:1-2). No lasting value; temporary pleasure but doesn’t speak to man’s deepest needs.
2. A connoisseur of wine; i.e., the cultivated tastes of the aristocracy (2:3). Some pursue the “cultured” life of fine food, drink, art, theatre, etc. Wine and frivolity (folly) do not capture the deeper meaning of life.
3. Great works (2:4-6), houses, vineyards, orchards, fountains, etc. likewise did not satisfy. The wealthy build monuments (buildings) to themselves; their legacy is their estate.
4. Indulgences of kings and aristocrats: servants, herds/flocks, silver/gold, musical entertainment (2:7-8).

C. In all his pursuits of true happiness and fulfillment, Solomon retained his wisdom. He continued to evaluate the situation with his full mental faculties intact. What did he conclude?

1. “*All was vanity and grasping for the wind ... no profit under the sun*” (2:11).
2. Nebuchadnezzar would later look upon Babylon and exalt himself for the great city which he had built (Dn 4). But Solomon in his wisdom recognizes the truth: that earthly, material, fleshly pursuits do not touch the true significance of man.
3. Hollywood people constantly fall prey to these false values: they get their fame

and fortune and find them to be empty. They continue searching in booze, drugs, parties, lust, etc. But we need to learn this lesson and stop investing so much time and effort in the material pursuits that promise so much and deliver so little.

4. Death: The Great Equalizer – Ecc 2:12-26

A. Solomon considers wisdom from two points of view:

1. From earthly perspective, wisdom excels folly (2:12-14). The wise man sees the true essence of life: he evaluates things properly and lives better for it.
2. On the other hand, both the wise and foolish will die (2:15-16). So wisdom has its limitations; it is not the be-all and end-all of life.
3. “*Therefore I hated life ...*” (2:17). One writer suggests “disgusted.” Solomon is disenchanted with earthly life, for it offers nothing of eternal value. It is full of labor with little results. So much vain effort is spent; so much is wasted, especially by those squandering life by looking for happiness in fun, drinking, etc.

B. The fruits of labor left to others (2:18-23). Those who build great estates, empires will eventually face the reality of others taking control of their fortunes. **You can’t take it with you!**

C. The spiritual/philosophical assessment of amassing goods (2:24-26):

1. It is “*from the hand of God*” to enjoy life (2:25). All is not to be misery and weariness. But the work and accomplishments must be kept in perspective.
2. It is also from God to do with men and their possessions as He wills (2:26). We only have what God allows, and God has the right to distribute goods as He sees fit. Life is lived ultimately under the providential hand of God.
3. If we don’t take this into account as we assess life, we will be empty.

Observations

- A. Man’s arrogance tends to make him reject these truths. Each generation thinks it is different and superior to the rest. But if the earth survives another million years, our generation will be considered the dawn of humanity, primitive and crude.
- B. Solomon was a man of unlimited means, experience (1:16). His society was just as advanced as ours in comparison to previous ages. His assessment was accurate for all cultures in all times.
- C. It is the mark of a wise man to learn from the experiences of others.