

Chapter 1: Nothing New Under the Sun

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

When God created the world, he saw that his creation was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Still, the “very good”-ness of creation must be understood in light of two very important caveats. First, from the beginning, God planned to elevate the “natural” nature of humankind to a “spiritual” nature, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15:42–46. Humankind’s natural existence had to come first, but God’s plan was always to elevate us to a spiritual existence marked by imperishable, glorious, powerful life. Second, that first man, Adam, failed to give to God personal, perfect, perpetual, exact, and entire obedience. Instead, Adam sinned against God, plunging not only the Adam and Eve, but the entire human race—and all of creation—under the curse of sin. Creation is indeed “very good,” but creation was never meant to be permanent in its original form. Furthermore, that “very good” creation has been marred by sin.

How, then, do we live in a world that remains “natural,” and that suffers from the frustration and futility of the curse of sin? This is the question that Solomon takes up in the book Ecclesiastes. This book is not a self-help productivity book offering life hacks to get the most out of your days on this planet. Rather, this is a book of reflective wisdom, confronting the cold facts of the vanity of our life in this world. It is a book that is somber, nearly to the point of despair. Nevertheless, Solomon stops short of plunging us into full-scale nihilism. Rather, Solomon takes times to point out and encourage us toward the enjoyment of the good parts of life. Ultimately, though, Solomon’s burden is to point us to a life beyond what we are experiencing now, in eternity to come. If we seek our ultimate satisfaction in this world, then we will be disappointed. At every turn, Solomon will point us to the gospel of God in heaven, since *there is no salvation under the sun*.

The Preacher’s Motto (Eccl. 1:1–2)

The book of Ecclesiastes begins by identifying the author of the book. These are the “words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (v. 1).¹ The word translated here as “Preacher” (קֹהֵלֵת; *Qohelet*) is notoriously difficult to translate into English. It is clear that the word represents a male speaker, but the word itself is a feminine participle of the verb קָהַל (*qāhal*), which means to *call together*, or to *collect*, or to *assemble*.² The noun form, קָהָל (*qāhāl*), is a common word to describe any assembly in the Old Testament, whether a civic assembly, or a religious assembly. Thus, in the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament), this word is often translated with words like συναγωγή (*synagōgē*; e.g., Num. 16:3), meaning “gathering” or “assembly” (such as the

¹ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1992), xx.

² L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), electronic ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1078–1079.

Jewish “synagogue”), or ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*; e.g., Neh. 8:2), meaning “church.” The word *Qohelet*, then, likely refers to someone who calls the assembly to order, or who speaks to those assembled. For this reason, this word has long been translated as “Preacher,” from Jerome’s Latin translation (*concionator*; ca. 405 AD) to Martin Luther’s German translation (*Prediger*; ca. 1534 AD), to the English Standard Version we use today.³

Who, then, is this “Preacher”? He identifies himself as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” While this phrase is used to describe all the sons of David (e.g., 2 Sam. 13:1; 1 Chron. 3:1, 9; 2 Chron. 11:18; 13:8; 23:3; 32:33), it is typically used to refer to Solomon specifically (e.g., 1 Chron. 29:22; 2 Chron. 1:1; 13:6; 30:26; 35:3; Prov. 1:1). Certainly, the author is claiming to be “king in Jerusalem,” which would exclude any sons of David who did not reign as king (e.g., 2 Sam. 13:1; 1 Chron. 3:1–9). The author will repeat the assertion that he has been “king over Israel in Jerusalem” in Ecclesiastes 1:12, and he will state that he surpassed “all who were over Jerusalem before me” in wisdom and greatness (Eccl. 1:16; 2:9). Clearly, the author holds himself out as Solomon. Nevertheless, we should observe that the author never quite names himself as Solomon.⁴ For this reason, as well as a number of technical reasons about the Hebrew used in this passage, many scholars have argued that someone other than Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. In my judgment, many of these arguments have been answered as effectively as can be expected, given the antiquity of the book.⁵ While acknowledging that Solomon never identifies himself as clearly in Ecclesiastes as he does in Proverbs 1:1, or in Song of Songs 1:1, I hold the position that Solomon is nevertheless the author of this book as well as the others.⁶

After his enigmatic identification of authorship, Solomon proceeds to his motto: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (v. 2).⁷ Note well how strong this language is, not only in the phrase “vanity of vanities,” but in the fact that that phrase is repeated, and then concluded with the absolutized statement that “All is vanity.”⁸ We will echoes of this line through the book (esp. Eccl. 1:14; 2:11, 17; 3:19), but the verse in its entirety will reappear at the very end of the book in Ecclesiastes 12:8.⁹ This line, appearing as bookends at the beginning and end of the book, should guide much of how we understand and think about the material that we will be studying. This word “vanity” refers to a vapor, or a mere breath: “nothing you could get your hands

³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xx.

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and Time to Dance*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 21–22.

⁵ For a survey of arguments against and for Solomonic authorship, see Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary, v. 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 254–67.

⁶ cf. Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 1–4.

⁷ For this line as the Preacher’s “motto,” see Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 21; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 3.

⁸ Charles Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, The Geneva Series of Commentaries (1860; repr., Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 5.

⁹ Douglas B. Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 27.

on; the nearest thing to zero.”¹⁰ As Douglas Miller helpfully distinguishes, though, this idea of “vanity” has three general categories of meaning: (1) something that is empty or futile (Eccl. 1:2–11, 12–15; 2:24–26); (2) something that is insubstantial, bringing no significant benefit, or short-lived (Eccl. 6:12; 11:10–12:1); or, (3) something that is grievous (e.g., Eccl. 2:18–19; 4:7–8; 6:1–6; 8:10–15; 9:1–3).¹¹ James 4:13–15 echoes and reinforces this point, by reminding us that our lives are mere mists, here today and gone almost immediately.¹²

By speaking of all of life as a “vanity of vanities,” the Preacher may provide us with a clue to the overall meaning of this book, since, as Derek Kidner points out, the construction of this phrase sounds like something of a parody of the “holy of holies”: “Utter emptiness stands here in mute contrast to utter holiness, that potent reality which gave shape and point to the traditional piety of Israel.”¹³ Where this world seems so important and significant and meaningful, especially in contrast with our worship of the invisible God, the book of Ecclesiastes is pushing us to see things rightly. It is this world that is vanity, where God is holy. A further confirmation of this idea arises by the observation that, outside the book of Ecclesiastes, the word “vanity” appears only 32 times, and nearly half of those passages (13 out of 32) use the word to describe idols.¹⁴ To worship an idol that we can see is vanity, since this whole world is “vanity of vanities.”

We should also recognize that the word *vanity* (הֶבֶל; *hebel*) is spelled identically in Hebrew to the son of Adam and Eve, which we render as “Abel.” This is almost certainly significant, since the book of Ecclesiastes is filled with references and allusions to the book of Genesis.¹⁵ Regarding the connection of “vanity” with the slain son of Adam and Eve, Duane Garrett writes, “The reasons for this are not difficult to imagine. Genesis tells the story of how humans—originally in a state of life, paradise, and innocence—fell into guilt, toil, and mortality. Ecclesiastes tells how persons now made weak and mortal should live.”¹⁶ Indeed, the word translated as “vanity” in the Greek Septuagint (ματαιότης; *mataiotēs*) appears significantly in Romans 8:20: “For the creation was subjected to *futility* (ματαιότητι; *mataiotēti*), 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” (Rom. 8:20–21).¹⁷

This does not mean that creation has no value whatsoever, but it reminds us that creation is passing away. Benjamin Shaw writes, “Solomon begins his book by reminding his readers bluntly that this world is passing. Everything about it is passing. The person who tries to hang on to it will ultimately be frustrated by disappointed because it does not last.”¹⁸ This book of Ecclesiastes, then, teaches us how to live in a world that is passing away. As Walter Kaiser writes, “Ecclesiastes is the

¹⁰ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 22.

¹¹ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 29.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2013), 59.

¹³ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 22.

¹⁴ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 63.

¹⁵ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 10–11.

¹⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 279.

¹⁷ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 39.

¹⁸ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 7.

best news around for such baffled and confused postmodern men and women. It is the book for persons who want to live again—now. It is the working person’s book: it answers the residual boredom and loneliness of postmodernity, especially for those who are tired of the routine of joylessly eating, drinking, and earning a paycheck—with no sense of any enjoyment in the whole process, or even of where any of it comes from, much less with what any of it means!”¹⁹ The book of Ecclesiastes, then, is not a book of existential despair and meaninglessness. Rather, the book of Ecclesiastes is filled with great hope, as it redirects our ultimate hope away from the temporal, passing-away nature of this world, to the ultimacy of God and of his eternal kingdom. Indeed, Martin Luther considered Ecclesiastes to be a book filled with great optimism, teaching us how to enjoy the goodness of this world, while avoiding the curse of putting all our hope in it.²⁰

Perpetual Motion (Eccl. 1:3–7)

To support his assertion that all is vanity, the Preacher asks first about what man gains by all his toil by which he toils under the sun (v. 3). The phrase “under the sun” is a phrase that appears only in the book of Ecclesiastes.²¹ It refers to live lived in this world, on the earth, and it is set in contrast to heavenly life.²² Life “under the sun,” without recourse to the live that God provides, is filled with toiling toil, but can gain nothing that is ultimately substantial.²³ The word for “gain” is a business word, referring to the profit that someone makes from their business. Thus, Jesus himself echoes this question when he asks, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).²⁴ What gain is everything under the sun, if we lose our everlasting, spiritual soul in the process?

This is a question that each individual must ask, but the Preacher extends the logic by observing the the brevity of the many generations in the face of the ongoing existence of the earth: “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (v. 4). We are transient and temporary, here today and vanishing into history without a trace that we have ever been here at all.²⁵ Certainly, this is a sobering and humbling thought for human beings; however, this phrase also subtly weaves in good news. By observing us that the earth carries on long after we die, the Preacher is reminding us that God has fulfilled the promise he made in his covenant with Noah after the flood, that the earth would remain until the end of the world (Gen. 8:22).²⁶

So, the sun rises and then goes down, hastening to the place where it will rise once more (v. 5).

¹⁹ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 12.

²⁰ William J. Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 149–51.

²¹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, v. 18 (1983; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 68.

²² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 7.

²³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 42.

²⁴ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 24–25.

²⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 284–285.

²⁶ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 14.

This word for “hasten” is literally “pant,” portraying someone exhausted by the busyness of their task (cf. Ps. 119:131; Isa. 42:14).²⁷ Furthermore, the winds blow around and around, on an endless cycle from south to north, and then back again (v. 6). Finally, the streams run endlessly into the sea, only for the water to evaporate and return by rainfall to the streams to start the process again (v. 7). Creation endlessly continues the same cycles without gaining anything from those iterations. Just as man gains nothing from his toil, creation gains nothing from the ceaseless repetition of her patterns.²⁸ Still, we should again see that this endless movement provides predictable, constant stability to support all the various operations of the world, as Walter Kaiser points out.²⁹ Creation does not necessarily make progress; however, creation continues in the task God has appointed for her, until God returns again. This is good news, in the sense that the stability of creation allows life to continue; however, the Preacher wants us to see clearly that nothing, ultimately, will be gained from these cycles.

No Progress, No Memory (Eccl. 1:8–11)

Thus, the Preacher declares that all things are “full of weariness”—a weariness that cannot be satisfactorily described by words (v. 8a).³⁰ Nothing that we see can satisfy the eyes, and nothing that we hear can fill the ears (v. 8b). In this world, there is always more to see, and always more to hear, and none of it will bring the final satisfaction that we crave.³¹ What has existed will exist again in the future, and what has been done will be done again, so that there is nothing new under the sun (v. 9). No one can point to anything and insist that it is new, even in an age of rapid technological advances such as ours (v. 10). The ages who lived in advance of us have done it all already, although we don’t remember them—just as those who come after us will not remember us either (v. 11).

There are two important sides to this “weariness.” First, again, the perpetual stability of creation over endless generations provides the necessary prerequisite for any kind of life in this world.³² Our lives are good, and the work that we are given is good, and none of it would be possible if the earth did not keep spinning in its orbits, through its endless cycles and seasons. Second, though, we must see that we can never find ultimate meaning and satisfaction within this world. Every age has imagined that a golden era was right around the corner, contingent upon the right living, the right accomplishments, or the right relationships. Every age, however, has lived the same kind of lives, and died the same kind of deaths. We will die like those who have gone before us, and those who come after us will endure the same kind of existence.

So, the Preacher is laying out the limitations of the lives that we live “under the sun,” and pointing us instead to the life that God offers to us from “above the sun.” Only the one who “came down from heaven” (John 3:13) can accomplish something truly *new*: a new covenant, a new birth,

²⁷ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 69.

²⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

²⁹ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 70.

³⁰ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 8.

³¹ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 72.

³² Kaiser, *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*, 71–72.

new life, and a new commandment.³³ The Preacher's burden, then, is to highlight the goodness of this world, insofar as it goes, while urging us not to put our lasting, ultimate hope in this world. Instead, the Preacher urges us to put all our hope and dependence in the kingdom of God, as he reigns above the sun.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Who wrote Ecclesiastes? Why is the authorship of Ecclesiastes important for interpreting and understanding this book? What does Solomon mean when he speaks of “vanity” in Ecclesiastes (cf. v. 1)? How is the word “vanity” used elsewhere in the Old Testament? Where does the word or concept of “vanity” appear in the New Testament? What does Solomon mean when he declares that this world is a “vanity of vanities”? Where are you tempted to put too much faith in this world?
- 2) What profit does Solomon see in the toil with which people toil during the course of their lives (v. 2)? How much progress can we really make with such short lifespans, in contrast to the ceaseless cycles and seasons of creation (v. 4–6)? Where does your ambition tempt you to believe that you stand to gain something of enduring value from your toil in this world? Why does Solomon want to pour this bucket of cold water on those ambitions?
- 3) Why does Solomon think that we are never satisfied (v. 8)? What do you think causes our eyes and our ears to seek ever-more input? How do Solomon's words resonate with your own habits for consuming news, entertainment, information, gossip, art, etc.? What do you think we are seeking? Why are we never satisfied with what we see, or with what we hear? Why do we nevertheless believe that we will be satisfied with just a little bit more?
- 4) What does Solomon mean when he writes that “there is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9)? If Solomon could see the dramatic cultural and technological advances of the last century, do you think he would still say the same thing? Why or why not? How much has really changed? How much has, in fact, remained the same? How should our consistent, persistent condition in this world drive us to find salvation outside of all that we find “under the sun”?

³³ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 288.