

THE FUTILITY OF ALL HUMAN ENDEAVOUR

ECCLESIASTICS 1:1-11

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In this introductory section the author identified himself (v. 1), stated his theme (v. 2), and defended it in general terms (vv. 3-11).

1:1. As with other wisdom literature in the Old Testament (e.g., *Prov 30:1; 31:1; cf. Prov 1:6; 22:17; 24:23*) the author of Ecclesiastes identified this book as his own.

Elsewhere (*Eccl 12:11*), however, he also claimed divine authority for it. The author identified himself only by his titles: **the Teacher, a son of David, the king in Jerusalem**. As indicated in the *Introduction* under "Authorship and Date" these titles plus other information in the book (cf. *1:12,16; 2:4-9*) suggest that the author was Solomon.

THE FUTILITY OF HUMAN EFFORT (1:2)

1:2. After identifying himself as the author, Solomon declared most emphatically that everything is futile or **meaningless**. Five times in this one verse he used *hebel*, the Hebrew word for "meaningless." Four of those times are in a twofold repetition of a Hebrew superlative construction which the KJV renders "Vanity of vanities" and the NIV renders **Meaningless!**

Meaningless! and Utterly **meaningless!** As indicated in the *Introduction's* "Theme and Purpose," he used this metaphorical term throughout the book to refer to what is without real substance, value, permanence, significance, or meaning.

Here at the outset he applied this to everything, by which he meant all human endeavours, as is obvious from verse 3 and his argument throughout the book. He gave general support of the futility of human effort demonstrated from nature (1:3-11).

In support of his theme, Solomon argued first in broad general terms that it is impossible for human efforts to have permanent value. He did this in a poem on the ceaseless rounds of generations (v. 4) and of nature (vv. 5-7), introduced by a rhetorical question (v. 3) and followed by a poetic conclusion (vv. 8-11).

THESIS: NO ULTIMATE PROFIT IN HUMAN LABOR (1:3)

1:3. Solomon followed the announcement of his theme (v. 2) with a rhetorical question which demanded a negative answer. By this device, a common feature in his argumentation (*2:2; 3:9; 6:8,11-12; etc.*), he denied any profit or **gain** to a person's **labour**.

The term "gain" (*yitron*), unique to the Book Ecclesiastes, occurs seven times (1:3; 2:11 ["gained"], 13 ["is better"]; 3:9; 5:9 ["profits"], **5:16; 10:10** [not trans, in the NIV]). "Gain" refers literally to what is left over (a gain or a profit) or metaphorically to what is advantageous or of benefit. Though some things have relative advantage over others (e.g., light over darkness and wisdom over folly, 2:13), Solomon affirmed at the outset that people gain no ultimate advantage or profit from all their toil. By the phrase **under the sun** he meant "down here on the earth." He used this phrase repeatedly (29 times) throughout the book, often in connection with man's toil.

PROOF: CEASELESS, WEARISOME ROUNDS (1:4-11)

Solomon supported his thesis by referring to the ceaseless rounds of generations (v. 4) and of nature (vv. 5-7). From them he concluded that people's labor, like these ceaseless rounds, produces nothing permanent or satisfying (vv. 8-11).

■ **ECCLESIASTES 1:4**

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh. The translation rather weakens the force of the original, which is, *a generation goeth, and a generation cometh*. Man is only a pilgrim on earth; he soon passes away, and his place is occupied by others. *For the covenant from the beginning is, Thou shalt die the death. As of the green leaves on a thick tree, some fall and some grow; so is the generation of flesh and blood, one cometh to an end, and another is born. Every work rotteth and consumeth away, and the worker thereof shall go withal"*

a. The impermanence of man (1:4)

1:4. The first fact Solomon cited in support of his thesis is the impermanence of a person's existence. In contrast with **the earth**, the scene of one's labor, which remains (lit., "stands") **forever**, every person is a transitory being, a small part of the coming and going **generations**.

b. The ceaseless rounds of nature (1:5-7)

1:5-7. The second fact Solomon cited in support of his thesis is the ineffectiveness of labor, demonstrated by nature's ceaseless activity. Mere activity in and of itself produces nothing of ultimate value.

c. The sun and the wind are in constant motion but never arrive at any fixed goal or lasting rest. The streams continually flow to **the sea, yet the sea is never** full. (NASB'S "to the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again" is preferred to NIV'S **to the place the streams come from, there they return again.**) Thus all the activity of nature is monotonous (**round and round... ever returning**) and wearisome (hurries in v. 5 means lit., "pants [from exhaustion]"; cf. **Jer 14:6**), without effecting any progress or reaching any fixed goal.

The repetition of human endeavors (1:8-11)

1:8-11. Next Solomon argued that what is observable in the rounds of nature is also true of all human endeavor. **Nothing** happens or is done that is really **new** (v. 9). Things are only apparently **new** (v. 10a) because people do not recollect former actions, events, and accomplishments (vv. 10b-11). For example, man's journey to the moon and the discovery of America, though different, were both explorations of distant places, involving adventure and risk. And the invention of dynamite and of the atomic bomb shared the element of discovering an "*explosive*."

Thus what is true in the realm of nature - the constant repetition of previous accomplishments - is in essence true of the activity of people and is included in the observation that all things produce only indescribable weariness and lack of satisfaction (all things **are wearisome**, v. 8). In this section, Solomon approached the problem as a scientist and examined the "wheel of nature" around him: the earth, the sun, the wind, and the water. (This reminds us of the ancient "elements" of earth, air, fire, and water.) He was struck by the fact that generations of people came and went while the things of nature remained.

There was "change" all around, yet nothing really changed. Everything was only part of the "wheel of nature" and contributed to the monotony of life. So, Solomon asked, "Is life worth living?" Solomon presented four pieces of evidence to prove that nothing really changes.

The earth (v. 4). Nature is permanent, but man is transient, a mere pilgrim on earth. His pilgrimage is a brief one, for death finally claims him. At the very beginning of his book, Solomon introduced a topic frequently mentioned in Ecclesiastes: the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Individuals and families come and go, nations and empires rise and fall, but nothing changes, for the world remains the same.

The sun (v. 5). We move now from the cycle of birth and death on earth to the cycle of day and night in the heavens. "As sure as the world!" is replaced by "As certain as night follows day!" Solomon pictures the sun rising in the east and "panting" (literal translation) its way across the sky in pursuit of the western horizon. But what does it accomplish by this daily journey? To what purpose is all this motion and heat? As far as the heavens are concerned, one day is just like another, and the heavens remain the same.

The wind (v. 6). From the visible east-west movement of the sun, Solomon turned to the invisible north-south movement of the wind. He was not giving a lecture on the physics of wind. Rather, he was stating that the wind is in constant motion, following "circuits" that man cannot fully understand or chart. "The wind blows where it wishes," our Lord said to Nicodemus, "*and you ... cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes*" (*John 3:8, NKJV*).

Solomon's point is this: the wind is constantly moving and changing directions, and yet it is still — the wind! We hear it and feel it, and we see what it does, but over the centuries, the wind has not changed its cycles or circuits. Man comes and goes, but the changeless wind goes on forever. The sea (v. 7). Solomon described here the "water cycle" that helps to sustain life on our planet. Scientists tell us that, at any given time, 97 percent of all the water on earth is in the oceans, and only .0001 percent is in the atmosphere, available for rain. (That's enough for about ten days of rain.) The cooperation of the sun and the wind makes possible the evaporation and movement of moisture, and this keeps the water "circulating." But the sea never changes! The rivers and the rains pour water into the seas, but the seas remain the same.

So, whether we look at the earth or the heavens, the winds or the waters, we come to the same conclusion: nature does not change. There is motion but not *promotion*. No wonder Solomon cites *the monotony of life* as his first argument to prove that life is not worth living (1:4-11).

All of this is true *only if you look at life "under the sun"* and leave God out of the picture. Then the world becomes a closed system that is uniform, predictable, unchangeable. It becomes a world where there are no answers to prayer and no miracles, for nothing can interrupt the cycle of nature.

If there is a God in this kind of a world, He cannot act on our behalf because He is imprisoned within the "laws of nature" that cannot be suspended. However, God *does* break into nature to do great and wonderful things! He does hear and answer prayer and work on behalf of His people. He held the sun in place so Joshua could finish an important battle (**Josh 10:6-14**), and He moved the sun back as a sign to King Hezekiah (**Isa 38:1-8**). He opened the Red Sea and the Jordan River for Israel (**Ex 14; Josh 3:1-4:24**). He "turned off" the rain for Elijah (**1 Kings 17**) and then "turned it on" again (**James 5:17-18**).

He calmed the wind and the waves for the disciples (**Mark 4:35-41**), and in the future, will use the forces of nature to bring terror and judgment to people on the earth (see Rev 6ff).

Nothing Is New (**Eccl 1:8-11**)

In this discussion, Solomon stopped being a scientist and became a historian. Let's follow the steps in his reasoning.

Man wants something new (v. 8). Why? Because everything in this world ultimately brings weariness, and people long for something to distract them or deliver them. They are like the Athenians in Paul's day, spending their time "*in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing*" (**Acts 17:21**). But even while they are speaking, seeing, and hearing these "new things," they are still dissatisfied with life and will do almost anything to find some escape.

In Eccl 3:11, Solomon explains why men and women are not satisfied with life: God has put "eternity in their heart" (NIV, NASB, NKJV) and nobody can find peace and satisfaction apart from Him. ***The world provides nothing new (vv. 9-10)***. Only God can create new things, and he begins by making sinners "new creatures" when they trust Jesus Christ to save them (**2 Cor. 5:17**). Then they can walk "*in newness of life*" (**Rom. 6:4**), sing a "*new song*" (**Ps. 40:3**), and enter into God's presence by a "*new and living way*" (**Heb. 10:20**). One day, they will enjoy "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1) when God says, "*Behold, I make all things new*" (**Rev. 21:5**).

Why we think things are new (v. 11). The answer is simple: we have bad memories and we don't read the minutes of the previous meeting. (See 2:16; 4:16, and 9:5.) It has well been said that the ancients have stolen all of our best ideas, and this is painfully true.

Solomon wrote, of course, about the basic principles of life and not about methods. As the familiar couplet puts it: Methods are many, principles are few / methods always change, principles never do. The ancient thinkers knew this. The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote, "They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing more than we have seen." The only people who really think they have seen something new are those whose experience is limited or whose vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things. Because something is recent, they think it is new; they mistake novelty for originality.

CONCLUSION

The historian now becomes the philosopher as Solomon tells how he went about searching for the answer to the problem that vexed him. As the king of Israel, he had all the resources necessary for "experimenting" with different solutions to see what it was that made life worth living. In the laboratory of life, he experimented with enjoying various physical pleasures (2:1-3), accomplishing great and costly works (2:4-6), and accumulating great possessions (2:7-10) only to discover that all of it was only "vanity and grasping for the wind" (v. 14, NKJV).

But before launching into his experiments, Solomon took time to try to think the matter through. He was the wisest of all men and he applied that God-given wisdom to the problem. He devoted his mind wholly to the matter to get to the root of it ("seek") and to explore it from all sides ("search"). Dorothy Sayers wrote in one of her mystery novels, "There is nothing you cannot prove if only your outlook is narrow enough."