



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

As we delve into a study of the text of Ecclesiastes, remember our keys to understanding the book: The Key Question: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Ecc. 1:3). The Key Word: *hebel* means breath or vapour and is usually translated as meaningless or vanity. The Key Phrase is “under the sun” and represents those things done on this earth and viewed from a human perspective. Finally, the Key Conclusion is: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” (Ecc. 12:13)



All Is Vanity **Ecclesiastes 1:1 - 2:26**

In 1:1, the author calls himself Qoheleth for the first of seven times. We will take the author to be Solomon as has been traditionally understood by Jews and early Christians. In Ecclesiastes, the wise king of Israel shares lessons he has learned in life. These lessons are likely aimed primarily at young men who he hopes will avoid his mistakes.

In 1:2, Qoheleth introduces his thoughts with the key word *hebel*. “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” (Ecc. 1:2) Solomon then sets out to show how things done under the sun are *hebel*.

1:3-11 is an introductory poem which begins with our key question: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”

Definition of Gain

The word “gain” is translated from the Hebrew word *yithron* which comes from the business community and describes what is left over on the balance sheets after all profits and losses are tallied.

- 1. Define the words “toil.”**
- 2. What answer is expected from the question posed in 1:3?**
- 3. What four illustrations does Qoheleth use to describe the futility of life “under the sun?” (1:4, 5, 6, 7)**
- 4. Why are eyes and ears “under the sun” never satisfied? (1:8)**

1:9-11 teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun. Every action, endeavour, or pleasure has been tried throughout human history. There is no long term remembrance of former things (or former people as some versions translate this verse.) No matter what we try, do, or accomplish “under the sun,” this will be soon forgotten after our passing by those who follow. There is utter futility in all things done for human satisfaction apart from God.

The author describes the vanity of human wisdom in 1:12-18. Here Qoheleth identifies himself as the king of Israel who sought out wisdom of all that is done under heaven.

5. How does Qoheleth describe the intensity of his search for wisdom? (1:13)

Solomon chronicles his search for wisdom as “*unhappy business that God has given to the children of man...*” The word translated “God” is not *Yahweh*, the personal name for God, but rather the more generic *Elohim*, showing that this quest for wisdom is not just an undertaking of God’s people, but rather a task of all people. God has placed within every person the desire to know the answers to life’s ultimate questions. “Under the sun” this undertaking is grievous and unhappy with no satisfying answer.¹



6. What are the ultimate questions that every human strives to answer.

7. What conclusion does the author reach after his investigation into all things done under the sun? (1:14)

Qoheleth realises that under the sun he cannot change very much in life (1:15). He internally dialogues in verses 16-17 concluding that no matter how much wisdom he accumulated he could never be satisfied. In fact, the more wisdom Solomon gained and the more knowledge he accumulated, the more vexation and sorrow he experienced.

After finding the search after wisdom futile, Qoheleth next pursued pleasure. Here he analysed every kind of self-indulgence, but found this vain as well.

8. What pleasures does the author pursue in 2:2-3?

9. Describe Qoheleth’s undertakings in 2:4-6.

Solomon’s Building Projects

1. Huge personal palace
2. A great hall with pillars of cedar
3. The porch of cedars
4. The harem for the daughter of Pharaoh
5. Fortresses
6. Store-cities
7. Chariot cities
8. Cities in distant lands
9. Great pools

(James Smith)

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 714.

10. What types of wealth did Solomon accumulate according to 2:7-8?

11. How does 1 Kings 11:3 support 2:8b?

In 2:9-11 Solomon had gained greater wisdom than all before him, he had not withheld any pleasure from himself, he had completed great projects and toiled tirelessly, but his only reward was the pleasure he found in these endeavours. However, even this reward quickly dissipated after the projects were completed and the pleasures faded leaving him all the more dissatisfied.

Now Qoheleth considered wisdom in comparison to madness and folly and was so thorough in his investigation that he believed that any who undertook this examination in the future will come to the same judgment (2:12).

12. Why does Qoheleth conclude that there is more gain in wisdom than folly? (2:13-14)

13. In the end, what happens to both the wise person and the foolish person? (2:15-16)

14. How did Solomon view life after chasing wisdom “under the sun?” (2:17)

Next our author examines his work. He ultimately sees futility in labour because whatever is accomplished will one day (after his death) be owned by another. Not only will another possess all that he gains, but he does not know the character of the person who comes after him. The one who follows might even be a fool who squanders all he had amassed and accomplished.

15. How does Solomon describe labour in 2:22-23?

The one who seeks satisfaction in wisdom, pleasure, or labour under the sun, and apart from God, is eventually dissatisfied. Now in 2:24 Qoheleth hammers the first nail of truth that will eventually lead to the key conclusion of the book.

When life is viewed through the lens of God’s blessing and with a life of faithfulness to him, man can enjoy eating, and drinking, and toil. Conversely apart from God there can be no lasting joy in these endeavours, but only *hebel*. When one lives for God, he receives true wisdom, and knowledge, and joy in life. These good things should be viewed as precious blessings that come directly from the hand of God.



Truth

“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.” (Ecc. 2:24)

Brown writes, “Neither achieved nor planned, neither grasped nor produced, the gifts of true pleasure are simply received from God.”² These gifts are what are often called the simple pleasures of life which are given value by the goodness of God.

16. How does the view of life differ between a man who lives to please God and a man who seeks fulfilment in life apart from God? (2:26)



² Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching.* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2000), p. 37.