

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER ECCLESIASTES 1-12

In a "Peanuts" comic strip Charlie Brown and Lucy are having a philosophical conversation. Lucy says, "Life is like a deck chair, Charlie Brown. Some place it so they can see where they are going; some place it so they can see where they have been; and some place it so they can see where they are at present." Charlie Brown replies, "*I can't even get mine unfolded.*"

In the book of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon is having a hard time getting his deck chair unfolded. He's frustrated and vexed trying to make sense out of life.

Life can at times be perplexing.

Winston Churchill once described the country of Russia as "A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That's how a lot of people feel about life...

As one person put it, "Life goes on - I just forgot why!"

Life is a knot that refuses to come untangle - it's a dilemma - a predicament - a puzzle - a Rubik's Cube.

We begin life as if we were following the proverbial rainbow, and at the end we expect to find a pot of gold... but that's not the way life always *pans out*...

It's been suggested that the author of Ecclesiastes intends, "To show us that at the end of life's rainbow lies not a pot of gold, but a pot of salty liver soup."

How do you feel about life when things don't go as you expected? All too often concepts like fairness and fulfillment seem like a fleeting fantasy. Life can get rough. It's full of disappointment, and disillusionment.

You'll relate to Ecclesiastes if life has ever left you with a bitter taste. Christian statesman, Chuck Colson, wrote, "Life isn't a book. Life isn't logical, or sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. And theology must be lived in the midst of that mess." Ecclesiastes is King Solomon's attempt *to find meaning in the mess!*

In chapter 1 Solomon introduces himself and begins his quest for meaning. Verse 1, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem."

"Ecclesiastes" is the Greek word for "Preacher."

Solomon is a *politician*, but for a time he assumes the role of *preacher* to teach a few lessons about life.

Solomon began his career a godly man... but there was a period when he turned his back *on God*. He tried to find meaning and purpose in life *apart from God!*

And if ever there was a man who could've achieved that goal it would've been Solomon. The Bible tells us he was the *wisest* and *wealthiest* man who ever lived.

Scholars came from all over the world to match wits with Solomon. He would host a "*battle of the brains,*" and all his challengers left marveling at his wisdom.

Solomon also had *cash to flash*. He was *the King of Bling*. He had a yearly stipend of 666 talents of gold.

A talent was 100 pounds, so Solomon's annual income was 66K-plus pounds of gold - a million ounces. At current prices that's over \$1.3 billion a year.

One OT commentator writes "No era of Israel's history was richer in possibilities for various pleasures, and no person in a better position to make the most of them than Solomon." The preacher used his position, and power, and purse to experiment with every thing imaginable in pursuit of deep down fulfillment.

First, Solomon traveled the path of **science and philosophy**... Then he turned to **pleasure**... And on to **achievement**... He moved to **religion, materialism, fame, and power**... He contemplated the value of **hard work, long life, a large family, a good name**...

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's thesis. On his trek down these various avenues of life he pauses to report his findings... *And he begins with his initial observation...*

Verse 2, "**Vanity of vanities,**" says the Preacher; "**vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**" **What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?**

This is an eloquent way of saying, "**Why bother rolling out of the sack tomorrow AM?**" "**What's the use in facing another day?**" All of life is vanity and futility!

This word "**vanity**" is the key word in Ecclesiastes. It means "**vapor or mist**" - and it implies *emptiness, dissatisfaction, frustration, and a lack of fulfillment.*

The word "**vanity**" appears 37 times in Ecclesiastes, and it sums up King Solomon's conclusions about life.

Without God life on Earth is no more meaningful than the steam you might wipe from your shower door - or a warm puff of breath on a cold winter morning. It's here for a second or two, and then it's suddenly gone.

The Hebrew word translated "**vanity**" could be rendered "*whatever is left after you break a soap bubble*". Life without God is like chasing soap bubbles!

I watch my grandkids run and chase the bubbles.

And they'll catch them, but the moment they capture the prize it pops. They're left holding nothing but air.

The kids are exhausted with absolutely nothing to show for their efforts. *Have you been chasing bubbles?*

Another key phrase appears in verse 3, "**under the sun.**" This phrase appears 29 times in Ecclesiastes, and it's an important point to understanding the book.

Solomon limits his search to things "**under the sun.**"

Not *heavenly things* but *earthly things*. His *boundaries are below* – material and physical pursuits.

When Solomon conducted this experiment he tried to keep God out of the picture. He tried to make sense of life without factoring God into the equation.

Of course, Solomon is not the only man who's tried to find meaning in life apart from God. Other brilliant men have tried, and come to the same conclusion...

George Bernard Shaw once moaned, "*Life is a series of inspired follies...*" A French proverb states, "*Life is an onion and one cries while peeling it...*" The Jewish Rabbi Sholom Aleichem wrote, "*Life is a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that...*"

He must've been a life-long Atlanta Hawks fan!

Shakespeare put into the mouth of Macbeth, "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...." William Cowper described life apart from God by likening it to "The toil of dropping buckets into empty wells, and growing old in drawing up nothing..."

And no less a philosopher than the cartoon character, Charlie Brown, once said, "I have a new philosophy. I'm only going to dread one day at a time."

If all there was to life was what exists "under the sun" I too would be pessimistic. But there's more to life!

Remember Ephesians 1:3 informs us that, "(God) has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." Get above the sun, reach into the heavenlies, and you'll find blessings galore.

1 Corinthians 15:58 counters Solomon's conclusions.

Paul tells those who serve Jesus, "Your labor is not in vain..." All is not vanity. Life is not worthless.

Life can be satisfying and fulfilling when you look "*above the sun*" - when you look to Jesus! Look under the sun, and life's a drag - but look to the Son, the S-O-N, and life takes on a whole new wonder and meaning.

When we come to Jesus, and connect with God, and relate our lives to Him - the value of life's experiences all get "marked up." All of life - *our work, our play, our relationships* now take on an eternal significance.

HG Wells once wrote, "Until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, he works to no end. He may have his friendships, his partial

loyalties, his scraps of honor. But all these things fall into place, and life falls into place, only with God." This is the truth that Solomon will finally affirm.

But first he moans some more in verse 4, "One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever." Solomon compares *the temporariness of man* with *the permanence of nature*. He points out that the trees in your yard will outlive you. You'll die before your shrubs.

Our lives are a blip on the radar screen of history.

Nature runs like clockwork. The sun rises and sets. Life goes on as if man were never here. The individual person plays a minor role in the grand scheme.

And Solomon's point is this... *though there's motion there's no meaning!* Man is trapped on the treadmill.

We live in a rut called "*life*." People, families, nations come and go - actors and props change - but the stage, script, and storyline remain the same.

This is why people long for something new and novel. They crave a distinguishing mark or experience that'll make them feel special - distinct from the crowd.

Solomon hates to disappoint those who *revel* in the *novel*, but there's really nothing new under the sun...

He tells us in verse 9, "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of

things that are to come by those who will come after.” For an example, just look at today's fashions... What goes around comes around.

Styles are cyclical. Hold on to your outdated threads long enough and your teenager will be wearing them.

The Greeks use to say, "The ancients have stolen all our best ideas." One Greek philosopher put it, "They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing more than we have seen."

That's just another way of agreeing with Solomon. He's telling us, "*There is nothing new under the sun.*"

And this is why we need to be careful about religious teachings that claim to be new. Satan is skilled at dressing up an old lie, and putting it in a new wrapper.

If you've ever studied "New Age" ideas you'll realize they're nothing more than the "old lie" Satan sold Eve in the Garden of Eden... *You can be your own god.*

Always remember, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new." Only Jesus can do a truly new work.

In Revelation 21 He says, "Behold, I make all things new." He puts a new song on our lips - a new desire in our hearts. He gives a new start - a new hope - a new home - a new family - a new power - a whole new life.

In Ecclesiastes 2 Solomon turns down a different road, and looks to pleasure! Verse 1, "I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity.

I said of laughter - "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom,

and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.” For a time Solomon was the *Hebrew hedonist*. He tried to find meaning in pleasure.

He became a "*party animal*." He "grabbed for all the gusto", "if it felt good, he did it." He "obeyed his thirst."

He adopted the motto: "Life is short, play hard."

And wow did Solomon play hard... 1000 wives and concubines. *Wine, and women, and wealth* - for a while Solomon's *palace* became a *perpetual party*.

Understand with Solomon's salary he could pay for the finest in food and entertainment. His parties made the Las Vegas Strip look like a two-bit carnival.

Solomon partied-heartily, but he found *no peace in his pleasure, no satisfaction in his sensuality, no contentment in his cravings, no real love in all his lusts*.

But if ever there were people trying to duplicate Solomon's pursuit it would be 21st century Americans.

We are a pleasure-crazed society. Did you know that "Every week in the United States of America: 12 million golfers vie for tee-times, 9 million tennis players compete across the nets, 4 million skiers glide down the slopes, and each year 23 million hunters and fisherman *comb the woods and fish the creeks*."

And many of these pleasure seekers are doing so, because they're trying to fill an inner emptiness! Living for the weekend has become their reason to exist.

Earlier Solomon said in Proverbs 14:3, "Even in laughter the heart may sorrow, and the end of mirth may be grief." When the party is over life is still vanity!

Time magazine once described our modern era with the phrase, "Anything goes, but nothing lasts." This was Solomon, "He had it all - but nothing mattered."

Jesus told the woman at the well, "You will thirst again." The refreshment she could receive from that well wouldn't last. It was temporary and superficial.

In fact, we ought to turn Jesus' statement into a plague and hang it above every source of pleasure our world has to offer - above sex, drugs, fame, money, sports, leisure, entertainment - "You will thirst again."

Get what you want, but it'll never be enough. Only Jesus can quench our deep-down spiritual thirst.

It was written of the prolific author, Ernest Hemingway, "He was born in 1899 and was the epitome of the 20th-century man. At age 25 he sipped champagne in Paris, had well-publicized game hunts in Africa, and hunted grizzly bears in the Northwest.

At the age of 61, after having it all - wine, women, song, a distinguished literary career, and Sunday afternoon bullfights in Spain - Hemingway chose to end his life, blowing his head off, leaving a note saying, "Life is one darn thing after another." Pleasure is fun for a season, but when the party is over, "all is vanity."

Yet parties and pleasure weren't the end of Solomon's pursuits. Before long his search for meaning turned from *enjoyment* to *employment* - from what he could *consume* to what he could *construct*.

Solomon tried his hand at business... He says in 2:4, "I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from

which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house.

Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers (some 30,000 according to 1 Kings), the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.

I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; **and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun.**"

The King went about building himself an empire! He labored and built and profited - yet all his ambition led to the conclusion, **"So what! Big deal! Is that all?"**

Once, an extremely successful, but dissatisfied businessman, had gone to his pastor for guidance.

The man confessed, **"For years I've been climbing the ladder of success, but just recently I've discovered it's been leaning against the wrong wall."**

No less an authority on money than the Wall Street Journal published the following quote, **"Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness."**

Solomon concludes in chapter 2 that *purpose* is not found in a *purse* - or *worth* in a *wallet* - or *satisfaction* in a *sale*. *Business* and *busyness* don't equal *blessing*.

There's a cathedral in Milan, Italy, that has three doors. Over the one on the right it reads: "All that pleases is but for a moment." Over the one on the left it reads: "All that troubles is but for a moment." But over the middle door it reads: "Nothing is important except that which is eternal." *This is Solomon's assessment.*

Yet in Chapter 3 Solomon makes another discovery. This time the Preacher tells us that God has taken a chip off eternity, and planted it in every human heart.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God "has put eternity in their hearts..." God places in each of us a tugging, a need, a frustration that can only be satisfied by a touch of eternity. *There's a God-shaped hole in each of us.*

This is heaven's homing device... Just as a bird has migratory instincts, and the salmon swims back to the spot he was spawned - God has put in each of us a longing that won't be satisfied until it's fulfilled by Him.

As Augustine prayed, "You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You." The emptiness within points us to God.

In Chapters 4-5 Solomon marches us down another avenue... Here he flirts with fame and power.

In verse 16 he brings up a king who rises from poverty to sit on the throne. "There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind."

This King reigned over a huge kingdom, but no one remembered him once he was gone? *And this caused Solomon to think...* Why work so hard to be famous, if you're forgotten before your corpse even gets cold?

Who remembers the 25th president of the United States? Or who won the World Series in 1934?

Or who founded General Motors? Or invented the ball point pen? *All these accomplishments were big deals at the time, but who remembers them now?*

How fickle were the cheers of the crowd on the Sunday that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. They all shouted "Hosanna" and hailed Jesus as their King.

Yet just four days later, the same voices screamed "Crucify Him, Crucify Him." Fame is a fleeting thing!

In 5:8, the Preacher writes of another frustration that made life difficult. "If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them." Solomon was king. And you'd think the King could clean up the courts, but he concedes, injustice is just a part of life. "High official watches over high official..." - they're all in cahoots!

There is a Spanish proverb, "Laws, like the spider's web, catch the fly and let the hawks go free."

I heard a jury once defined as "Twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer." I'm afraid that's what the judicial system has come to in America?

We expect right to be rewarded and evil to be punished. But that's not always how life turns out.

Often the cheater gets the higher grade - the liar is elected to office - the embezzler drives the Mercedes and lives in a mansion - the immoral man marries the beautiful woman. When injustice occurs life turns into *a crushing disappointment - a confounding contradiction*.

As long as we're depending on *sinful people* to hold *sinful people* responsible true justice will elude us.

Everywhere Solomon turns his conclusion is the same, "**vanity of vanities, all is vanity.**" And at the end of chapter 5 he pauses to draw another conclusion...

Verse 18, "**Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage.**

As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor - this is the gift of God.

For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart."

Based on Solomon's tone to this point, we might think he would advise us *to live an austere life - take a vow of poverty - separate ourselves from anything material or physical*. But instead Solomon says we should enjoy the gifts God gives us - *take a walk in the park... treat yourself to a ballgame... or an ice cream cone... eat a hot dog once in a while...* 1 Timothy 6:17 tells us that "**God gives us richly all things to enjoy.**"

Solomon isn't saying, life is bad so hide in a closet.

To the contrary, he's encouraging us to ***enjoy life, just don't expect more out of it than it can give...***

A new mom thinks her child is going to end her unhappiness and bring her fulfillment - *sorry!* Instead, that baby may cause her a few unhappy nights.

A businessman longs for a raise and promotion. He thinks if he gets a new job all problems will be over - *sorry!* Every *new job* comes with *new headaches*.

A single person assumes that if he or she can just get married, then their life will find new meaning - *sorry!* Marriage blesses, but it doesn't work miracles.

Hey, a new car - that's the ticket... *I've just got to have it...* But do you really think a chunk of steel, and paint, and moveable parts will really make you happy?

Generally speaking life is good. Having kids - being married - is wonderful... *That new job, and higher pay?* That's good too... *A new car?* Sure, I'll take one...

But our problem is that we expect more out of these things than they can give. *Stuff only stuffs an appetite.*

It doesn't satisfy. Our real longing is for something more. It's for a piece of the eternal. That's why life under the sun will never bring true and lasting peace.

In fact, most of the time, we don't even enjoy the blessings we do have, because we expect too much from them. We want more out of life than life can give.

Jason Lehman was a 14 year-old philosopher. He wrote a poem that appeared in a Dr Abby column...

"It was spring, but it was summer I wanted, the warm days, and the great outdoors. It was summer, but it was fall I wanted, the colorful leaves, and the cool, dry air. It was fall, but it was winter I wanted, the beautiful snow, and the joy of the holiday season.

I was a child, but it was adulthood I wanted, the freedom, and the respect. I was 20, but it was 30 I wanted, to be mature, and sophisticated. I was middle-aged, but it was 20 I wanted, the youth, and the free spirit. I was retired, but it was middle-age I wanted, the presence of mind, without limitations.

My life was over, but I never got what I wanted."

Taken in and of itself, everything in life is worthless.

You work a job only to provide food so you can go back and work some more... So you brought kids into the world, *for what?* So they can bring kids into the world? And their kids can bring kids into the world?

Where does it all lead? What does it accomplish?

Solomon will discover that **life becomes meaningful only as it relates to God**. It's only when life gets *marked up* with eternal value that I can see real meaning in life.

My **job** becomes significant when I view it as an opportunity to be a witness for Jesus... My **home** becomes a temple - a sacred place - where I can teach and represent God to my wife and kids... My **money** becomes more valuable when I use it to bless others...

My job is more than a paycheck.

My home is more than a place to store my junk.

My earnings are more than a temptation to my heirs.

All of life goes better with God! Solomon says the gifts of God can't be truly enjoyed and appreciated apart from the God who gives those gifts! **It's our relationship with God that gives our life meaning!**

In **Chapters 7-9 Solomon** brings up his greatest frustration about life - *and that's death*. He says it's better to be a living dog than a dead lion - for at least with life comes hope... Enjoy life while you've got it, for in the end both the good and the bad end up dead...

Death is the great spoiler! It adds to life's vanity...

In 9:2 he writes, **"All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead."**

Death is the common denominator. **The statistics are quite impressive - one out of every one person dies.**

Woody Allen cracks, **"It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."** But he will be! Death is the one appointment we all will keep.

Two people can be born in *different countries*, raised in *different cultures*, speak a *different language*, come from completely *different worlds* - yet they share the same destiny... **One day we're all going to die!**

And the reality of death is what robs life of much of its joy and meaning. Even when life is at its best there's still that nagging realization it won't last forever.

As they say, "All good things come to an end."

So what if I accumulate that nest egg, *I can't take it with me*. There's a Jewish proverb that states, "Shrouds have no pockets." Or as the old preacher stated, "I've never seen a hearse pulling a U-haul."

And logic should tell us... *If it's something we can't take with us, it's probably not that important after all.*

"Under the sun" men share a common destiny - they die. But "*above the sun*" - after death - the road forks...

One lane goes to heaven - the other leads to hell.

Puritan pastor Thomas Watson wrote this sobering truth: "Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise."

An Indiana graveyard has a tombstone with the following inscription, "Pause, stranger, when you pass me by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be, so prepare for death and follow me."

A quick-witted stranger did pass by. He read the inscription, and below it carved the words, "To follow you I'm not content, until I know which way you went."

Always remember, "Death is not an *accident*, it's an *appointment*." Hebrews 9:27 tells us, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." One day we'll all answer to our Creator for our choices.

In 12:13 Solomon reveals his final analysis: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.”

Here's the conclusion of Solomon's experiment. He's tried all that life has to offer - and all that really matters is to submit to God's authority, and walk in His will.

That's it! Here's the whole enchilada. Here's what it's all about... “fear God and keep His commandments.”

To “fear God” is to agree He knows better how to live my life than I do! God created life and He's given us instruction - the Bible - so we can live life to the fullest.

To “fear God” is to respect Him as *my Creator, my Lord, my final authority* - it's to bow my knee before Him, and ask “*God what will you have me to do?*”

Here's life, “fear God and keep His commandments.”

Even as Christians we can easily lose perspective.

The world around us is visible, and tangible. It curls around us like a tentacle to pull us into its web. It's a pied piper that plays a tune we're tempted to follow.

The lure of the physical world sucks us in, and clouds our thoughts, and lulls us into believing that IT is all there IS... and before we know it we're searching for meaning and fulfillment in things “under the sun.”

Once, a man and his family were visiting Niagara Falls early in the spring. Ice was flowing down the river.

Frozen in the ice were the carcasses of dead fish, and feeding on the carcasses were a handful of gulls.

The gulls were riding the ice until just before the chunks rolled over the precipice and crashed onto the river rocks below. As soon as the frozen dinner trays got close to the edge the gulls would fly away.

This man was watching as one of the gulls feasted on his dinner. He was oblivious to the dangers ahead.

He rode the ice too long. As the ice rolled off the ledge, the bird flapped his wings only to discover the extra delay had caused his feet to freeze to the ice.

The bird crashed with his dinner between his teeth.

God has given us *all things* to enjoy, but if we get too attached to anything *“under the sun”* we’re heading for a crashing disappointment. Again, it was Augustine who said, *“The soul of man is made with sweet tastes that only God Himself is rich enough to satisfy.”*

Look to life for more than it can offer and it becomes a miry quicksand... But **look through life** to the God who created all things - then *“fear God and keep His commandments”* - and life becomes a wonderful discovery of all God’s joys and blessings.

Reinhold Messner was a famous mountain climber.

He was the first of two men to climb Mount Everest without an oxygen bottle... Then he climbed the mountain again - this time by himself. It was a daring and dangerous venture, but Messner succeeded.

Afterwards, he was asked - *as are all mountain climbers* - *“why did you do it?”* And Reinhold Messner replied, *“Because at the top all the lines converge.”*

That's the way it is in life! When you focus on things "under the sun" - and approach life from a strictly human perspective - it's *a puzzle with missing pieces*.

But live your life *for the Son*, and *in the light of God's Son* - and all the lines converge. Life makes sense.

Here again is the conclusion of the matter - man's all in all is to "Fear God and keep His commandments."

I pray that becomes the bottom line in your life...

Perhaps you've been looking for fulfillment "under the sun." You've been chasing after the soap bubbles.

I'm here to invite you to life in the Son - the S-O-N...

Today, give your life to Jesus, and He'll give Himself to you... His pardon and His power - His fullness and His freedom - His peace and His joy... What a swap!