

**GOD WITH US**  
**Part 4: The Life and Writings of Solomon**  
*Vision and Vanity – Ecclesiastes*

**Message 14 – In Search of Meaning**  
**Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:23**

**Introduction**

The Hebrew name of this book is Qoheleth, which means “assembler (of students).” “Ecclesiastes” is the Greek translation of this title. Solomon is Qoheleth – the “teacher,” or “gatherer of students” and we, the readers are his students. Scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was composed later in Solomon’s life, while his heart was turning away from the Lord by his many wives. The book is a series of short essays and themed proverbs concerning the meaning (or, most often, the meaningLESSness) of life. Solomon recounts his own journey of seeking to find the true purpose of existence, and how his search often led him to the dead end of skepticism and despair.

The book of Ecclesiastes is not the only one of its kind in ancient literature. There are numerous similar examples of “pessimism literature” both before and after Ecclesiastes (eg. the Egyptian work entitled *The Man Who Was Tired of Life*, 2200 BC and the Babylonian *Dialogue of Pessimism*, 1300 BC). Ecclesiastes stands in contrast to these other works, however in this: Life is meaningless *only* when it is studied “*under the sun*” – apart from belief in God and eternity. When we open up eyes of faith then life takes on new meaning. Our experience of life this side of eternity will always be stained by the effects of sin. With faith in God, however, life will be painful but not pointless. Purpose and pain will coexist in the heart of one who sees this present life as a small dot on the line of eternity – or as Rick Warren put it, *life is a test, a trust and a temporary assignment*.

**The Endless Circle of Life: 1:1-11**

A merry-go-around, with its bobbing horses and loud music, is supposed to be a fun ride at an amusement park. Yet, in reality it is a false reality going in circles. When the ride stops, you get off right where you started, having gone nowhere. As Solomon

observed life, he began to feel like he was riding on a merry-go-round – a circular, monotonous existence with no ultimate purpose.

***“The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course” (1:6).***

As he observed this endless repetition, day after day, he grew weary. Was there any real progress? Was life headed anywhere?

***“All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? (1:8-10).***

He realized that *the past* has almost no lasting value. What is past is mostly forgotten to those living in the present. And those who live in the present will be long-forgotten memories to those in the future. What use is there in living if you are forever forgotten?

***“No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them” (1:11).***

Certainly, there are rare exceptions where an individual becomes a character remembered through the ages because of their impact upon the world, either positively or negatively (Solomon is an example). Yet, the vast majority will come and go without leaving a significant, lasting impression upon the world. Thus, the question is raised: IF my life does not have lasting value *here in this world*, then WHAT was the point of my life in the first place?

### **Trying to Make Sense of Life: 1:12-14**

Solomon identifies himself and states his intention. Life “*under the sun*” seems to be a heavy burden placed upon mankind by God. He will seek to find the meaning behind it all, if there is any.

***“I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (1:12-14).***

The phrase “*under the sun*” is used 22 times in Ecclesiastes to refer to life *lived here on earth, without any reference or connection to a future life in eternity with God.*

## Experiments in Satisfaction: 1:15 - 2:11

Trying to find some sort of meaning and purpose in life, Solomon engaged in an array of experiments in satisfaction. The Rolling Stones hit song said, *I can't get no satisfaction*. Solomon will try to find *some* satisfaction in life before he concludes the same.

### - In pursuit of Wisdom: 1:14-18

Solomon was, by God's unique gifting, the wisest man on earth in his day. Thus, his first experiment was to see if he could find ultimate meaning in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. He became something of a "secular philosopher."

***"I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (1:16-18).***

Solomon found that with increasing knowledge comes increasing grief. Why? He does not tell us why; but we can guess. **First**, knowledge increases our *responsibility to do something* with the knowledge that has been gathered. This boils down to *work*, and it is clear from Genesis 3:17-19 that all of man's work on this earth will be *painful*. (Note Eccl.2:23 – "*All his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest.*") **Second**, as we set about our work in this world we are confronted head-on with *everything that needs to be fixed*. (Note Eccl.5:13 – "*I have seen a grievous evil under the sun . . .*") We live in a very broken world, and the increased awareness of the pervasive pain and brokenness of our world brings grief to our souls. **Third**, we will *never be able to do enough* in our lifetime to make things right, regardless of how much knowledge we acquire and apply. (Note Eccl.1:15 – "*What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted.*") **Fourth**, as knowledge increases we become more and more aware of how much *we do not know and will never know*. (Note Eccl.12:23 – "*Be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.*")

Thus, the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge filled Solomon's mind with **information**; but it did **not** fill his soul with **satisfaction**.

True “wisdom” is seeing life from God’s perspective, and living our lives accordingly. When we try to understand life apart from God, we will inevitably fall short in our understanding (and thus, in our living). This is why Solomon, earlier in his life, made this declaration: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). Our knowledge of God is the hub around which all true wisdom and learning must turn. This is what the Lord Himself declared: Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:22-24).

### **- In pursuit of Pleasure: 2:1-3**

Solomon next put away his philosophical books and turned to hedonism (the pursuit of sensual pleasures). He had everything at his disposal to become the world’s foremost pleasure-seeker.

***I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives” (2:1-3).***

Ancient kings used court comedians to provide entertainment. Comedy helped Solomon to laugh for a while; but soon the jokes became stale and the laughter seemed like madness. “*Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools. This too is meaningless” (7:6).* Experiments in drinking gave him temporary relief; but when the effects of the wine wore off, he was back in the painful real world (with a hangover and a headache).

*There is nothing wrong with pleasure, unless you are pursuing pleasure for pleasure’s sake, which is a dead-end street. Scripture teaches that neither laughter nor wine is wrong; but our soul’s deepest craving can only be met by God. Do you find yourself needing comedy to laugh, or needing stimulants to make you feel good? God created the pleasures of this world for our enjoyment (see 1Timothy 4:3-5). But He did not created these pleasures to act as a substitute for Him. “In YOUR PRESENCE is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11).*

## **- In pursuit of Projects: 2:4,5**

Turning from hedonism, Solomon decided to try to find meaning by being very resourceful and industrious. Perhaps if he built things, particularly things that would improve the environment, he would feel satisfied with his life.

***“I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees” (2:4,5).***

Solomon’s spared no expense to luxuriate all of his properties with gardens and trees and ponds and, and, and . . . (He spent 13 years building his own residences – 1Kings 7:1-12). Yet, at the end of it all, he walked through his vast real estate holdings and found nothing deep enough to quench the nagging hunger in his soul. It was as if the saying of Saint Augustine (300 AD) was playing out in the soul of a man living 1,300 years before him: *“Thou has made us for Thyself, O God, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”*

Concerning earthly treasures, Jesus said: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).* IF we use earthly treasures for heavenly purposes, we will find great satisfaction and will receive a great reward. IF we use earthly treasures only for earthly purposes, we will find little satisfaction and will forfeit the rewards of heaven. Jesus gave this parable to illustrate the wrong way to use earthly wealth: *“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).*

## **- In pursuit of Possessions: 2:7,8**

Next, Solomon turned to increasing his net worth. If he were alive

today, he would certainly top the annual list of the wealthiest people alive. (See 1Kings 10:14-29.)

***“I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces” (2:7,8a).***

Materialism is rooted in **greed**: needing better, bigger, newer. It is fueled by **envy**: jealousy over the possessions of others. It leads to **coveting**: wishing that what others have could be mine. All three lead to an endless pursuit of MORE. When the culture encourages this desire for the newest and best of everything, then we are pulled into the endless pursuit of *things* that can never satisfy us.

### **- In pursuit of Sexual Pleasure: 2:8b**

Here we gain insight into *why* Solomon accumulated 700 wives and 300 concubines. He was trying to satisfy his thirst for delight.

***“I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart” (2:8b).***

Hugh Hefner had his Playboy Mansion. Solomon had something more the size of a Playboy City, teeming with beautiful women from all over the world. Yet, no amount of women could satisfy his sexual cravings. 1Kings 11:4 sadly records that his uncontrolled sexual lusts caused him to give in to his foreign wives’ religions and gods. His own heart gradually drifted away from the God of his youth.

### **- A summary of his experiments: 2:10,11**

At the end of *all* of these experiments, Solomon could *not* say that he was truly satisfied. He was satiated, but not satisfied. He indulged *all* of his physical, intellectual and sensual appetites; but there was still something missing in his soul.

***“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (2:10,11).***

The phrase “*when I surveyed . . .*” means to “*come face to face.*” When Solomon came face to face with the reality of all that he had

done, he had to conclude that *nothing was gained under the sun*. We could say of his experiments to find satisfaction: *Everything ventured, nothing gained*. In fact, *much was lost*. His experiments ultimately set his whole nation on a path of idolatries just like his own, turning their hearts away from the God of his father, David.

### **Wisdom and Folly both Meaningless: 2:12-16**

Solomon's final reflection gives us an indication of how completely he had closed his spirit off to "above the sun" thinking involving God, eternity, rewards for right living, etc.

***"The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said to myself, 'This too is meaningless.' For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die" (2:15,16).***

Two dead men have common fates: they both die and are buried. IF that is the end of the story, then Solomon was right: life is meaningless. Jesus, however, pointed out that two dead men may have very uncommon futures: One may hear GOD speak words of **commendation and praise** for a life well-lived. The other may hear GOD speak words of **condemnation and reproof** for a life well-wasted. (See all of Matthew 25 where Jesus addressed the issue of how our earthly lives will be evaluated in eternity.) Solomon was not looking beyond the grave for answers. At this point in his spiritual wandering, the grave was truly a "dead-end."

### **Conclusion: Life "under the sun" is Vanity: 2:17-23**

Solomon came to the conclusion that life "*under the sun*" had no ultimate meaning. In fact, he came to the low point where he "hated" all of life and all of his works.

***"So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me" (2:17,18).***

The Hebrew word "hebel" is usually translated "vanity," or "meaningless." It basically means, "zero." So, what Solomon discovered was this:

### **Life apart from God is a zero-sum game.**

Up until this point in the book, Solomon has used the pronouns **I**,

**me, my and myself** a whopping 75 times! In contrast, he has mentioned “God” only once. Yet, as he opens the next section and begins to turn his eyes toward God (2:24-26), he will mention **God** 7 times and himself (“I”) only once. This change in grammar is no mere coincidence. It points to the major theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. When my world revolves are “me, myself and I,” it becomes a pointless exercise in self-indulgence (vanity). When my world revolves around “God and His eternal purposes,” then everything else begins to come into focus.

*Solomon’s search for satisfaction was 3,000 years ago. Yet, how different was he from us, today? He had no stock market to invest in; but he amassed riches beyond anyone in his day. He had no Bluetooth stereo systems to fill his house with music; but he had real-life singers and choirs to bring the music live. He had no Internet to browse for sexual imagery; but he had more than 1,000 real-life women he could call upon at any time. He didn’t have late-night T.V. hosts to laugh with; but he had court jesters whose monologues were every bit as funny. He didn’t have the latest BMW to ride in; but he had the most exotic, handcrafted vehicles of his day, powered by the best horses in the world. Is there really anything NEW under the sun? Our search methods have advanced beyond Solomon’s; but our search for meaning and satisfaction is essentially identical to his. The outcome will be the same, IF we try to find satisfaction apart from a daily, deepening relationship with our Creator-God. Where are YOU searching for satisfaction and joy? Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73 was, like Solomon, searching for meaning in life. His conclusion: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but GOD is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25,26).*

### **Epilogue: An Atheist’s Bible?**

It is instructive to study the thinking of atheist when it comes to the question of purpose – Why are we here? Richard Dawkins, the most outspoken atheist in our day, concludes that we are merely DNA propagating machines. We exist for no other reason than to attempt to pass along a certain set of genes that will advance the process of biological evolution. Similarly, the renowned paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould concludes: *“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that*

*could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher' answer - but none exists." In other words, if you follow the philosophy of Naturalism (nature is all there is) our purpose can only be derived from the biological/cosmological accident that we find ourselves in. We are here to play our part in this mysterious, unplanned accident called "LIFE."*

Ursula Le Guin, described in 2016 by Time magazine as "America's greatest living science fiction writer" put it this way: *"Things don't have purposes, as if the universe were a machine, where every part has a useful function. What's the function of a galaxy? I don't know if our life has a purpose and I don't see that it matters. What does matter is that we're a part. Like a thread in a cloth or a grass-blade in a field. It is and we are. What we do is like wind blowing on the grass."* — Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven*

Her conclusion reminds me of the famous song by the band Kansas: *Dust in the Wind*.

*I close my eyes, only for a moment and the moment's gone.  
All my dreams pass before my eyes, a curiosity.  
Dust in the wind; all they are is dust in the wind.  
Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea.  
All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see  
Dust in the wind; all we are is dust in the wind  
Now, don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky  
It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy  
Dust in the wind; all we are is dust in the wind  
Dust in the wind; everything is dust in the wind*

How different a perspective we are given from the biblical point of view. **1.** We are here because God created us in His image and gave us the gift of life (Gen.1:27; John 10:10; 11:25,26). **2.** We are here because God desires to have a personal relationship with each of us (John 17:3; Matt.11:28-30). **3.** We are here because we reflect the nature of God to one another (1John 4:7; John 13:15). **4.** We are here to reproduce for the glory of God and rule the earth as God's viceroys (Gen.1:28). **5.** We are here to enter into the cosmic struggle against evil, as God's sons and daughters (Eph.6:10-18). **6.** We are here to walk in the good works He has prepared for each of us to walk in (Eph.2:10). **7.** We are here to live in such a way as to store up treasure in heaven (Matt.6:19-21).

8. We are here to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt.22:27,28). 9. We are here to prepare for eternity (2Cor.5:9,10). 10. We were made to live forever . . . in the presence of our Creator-God (Luke 23:42,43; John 14:1-3).

From the Christian point of view, this life is NOT a meaningless dot. It is, rather, a dot on the line of eternity. True purpose cannot be derived from our place *in this world*. True purpose can only be found in sources that *transcend this world* – namely, our Creator-God and the eternal paradise that He made for us to inhabit. A. W. Tozer put it this way:

*“The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. Many ordinary treasures may be denied him, or if he is allowed to have them, the enjoyment of them will be so tempered that they will never be necessary to his happiness. Or if he must see them go, one after one, he will scarcely feel a sense of loss, for having the Source of all things he has in One all satisfaction, all pleasure, all delight. Whatever he may lose he has actually lost nothing, for he now has it all in One, and he has it purely, legitimately and forever.”*

To put it differently, if you tear **Genesis 1-3** out of the Bible, along with **Revelation 19-22**, you are left with a story of human bloodshed – the “survival of the fittest.” In Genesis 4, Cain murdered Abel. Cain was stronger than Abel, thus he survived and succeeded in passing on his genes. In the last line of Revelation 18 we read of the blood of the prophets and saints who have been slain on the earth by those stronger than they. The slayers were successful in surviving and passing on their DNA. The saints fell like Abel . . . into meaningless nothingness. And, of course, in the middle of the story, we find Jesus being put to death by rulers and authorities. Pilate won . . . Jesus lost . . . in the ruthless biological fight for survival.

Our good friend Abdu Murray (North American Director for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) wrote to me:

*Without that objective purpose and value (provided by the beginning and end of the story) then we are just a part of nature which, as Tennyson wrote, is "red in tooth and claw" (relentless in shedding blood). Thank God for the true beginning and end!*