Introduction

During the course of this study you will be reminded several times that it’s important to frequently re-visit the context of Ecclesiastes in order to properly understand and apply what is being taught here. The key, repeated phrase throughout is “under the sun”, an expressive literary way of stating that Solomon is purposely limiting the discussion to what is happening here on earth, that which takes place between our birth and death. Ecclesiastes is the biblical answer to the world’s voluminous quest to answer the question, “Why are we here? What is our purpose?” It’s very important to always keep in mind that all of Solomon’s answers are provided within the context of GOD’S wisdom – the way God views and ordains things, and not according to the world’s definition of “wisdom”. Whether people accept it or not, this is the biblical answer.

Read 1:1-11

Q: What exactly is the biblical meaning of “vanity”?

A: Since the modern-day use of this word is most often along the lines of an inflated pride in one’s self or appearance or a kind of inflated superiority complex, it’s important to note that the original meaning of “vanity” in the English language is “something empty or valueless”. This is why some translations render v.2 as “Futility of futilities”. The Hebrew word could literally be translated as “vapor” or “breath”. It conveys the biblical idea of something that is unsubstantial, worthless, and ultimately unprofitable.

Observation: This mechanism (“Vanity of vanities”) is a very strong device in the language and culture where the repetition of the word serves to increase the force of the overall meaning. It’s similar to “holy of holies” (Ex. 26:13) and “servant of servants”. (Gen. 9:25)

Q: How do we know that the theme of Ecclesiastes is limited to things on earth instead of things of heaven?

A: This is the primary meaning of the repeated phrase “under the sun”. To reinforce this, v.3-7 open up with descriptions of earthly phenomena: the earth itself, the rising and setting sun, the blowing wind, the water cycle of the rivers and sea.

Q: What is likened to all these earthly cycles?

A: Every “generation” past, present, and future. In other words, all these physical futilities represent mankind’s futilities – they all come back to their original starting point. But they also serve to provide the contrast that although each generation of mankind comes and goes, the issues remain exactly the same.

1The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
2"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”
3What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?
4A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever.
5Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there again.
6Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns.
7All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again.
Q: What exactly are mankind’s futilities?
A: According to v.8-11 it’s the delusion that the things they experience in their own lifetime are new, when in fact they are merely the exact same things every generation which came before or is to come experience.

Point: Ever notice how there’s always someone trying to make the case that “things are different” today? While it’s true that mankind experiences technological advancements, why is it true that his spiritual nature and behavior have not? Every single false doctrine and false spiritual movement in the world today, although repackaged and marketed as something “new”, is actually the same thing Satan has tried to sell to every generation. This especially includes those claiming to have a “new” Word from God or empowered to do a “new” work or miracle.

Application: Believers can immediately identify spiritual deception by its claim to be something “new”. Every generation faces the same questions.

Read 1:12-18

Q: Who is the author of Ecclesiastes and what is his approach to resolving the issues?
A: The author is King Solomon and he is publishing the results of what he found as a result of applying the gift of wisdom bestowed on him by God. Ultimately he is applying the world’s greatest mind in order to understand the nature of the world itself.

Q: How would you characterize Solomon’s search as portrayed in this section?
A: It is the intellectual search.

Q: What are the three categories by which Solomon determined to understand all earthly things?
A: According to v.17 he desired to intellectually understand “wisdom”, “madness”, and “folly”.

All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one might say, “See this, it is new”? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us.

There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later still.

I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

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11There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later still.
Q: How do these terms compare and contrast to each other?

1. "Wisdom" – the ability to correctly judge and follow the best course of action based on the application of God’s Word. The first principle of biblical wisdom is that a person humbles their self before God in reverence and worship, completely obedient to His commands.

2. “Madness” – the end result of the complete rejection of God’s Word and ways, it is an ungovernable passion of violence against the things of God characterized by a reckless state of mind, blind rage, a depraved temper, or outright insane behavior.

3. “Folly” – the process of rejecting God’s Word and ways in favor of an alternative. It’s a process by which one first closes their mind to God, then evolves into a “scoffer” or outward critic of the things of God, and ultimately into an unredeemable backslider. The implication is that at one time they were presented with and acknowledged God’s Truth, but consciously chose to reject it. They are not “ignorant” but “rebellious”.

Point: Solomon is explaining that he explored the solutions to these answers not only as a true believer empowered with God’s wisdom, but in the form of each varying degree of a person rejecting God’s Word and ways from the mild backslider to the hardcore sinner.

Q: Why do you suppose Solomon keeps repeating that the results are akin to “striving after wind”?

A: It’s a very strong reinforcement in the Hebrew language of the core meaning of “vanity”, which is “vapor” or “breath”. A loose rendering might be, “It’s like trying to catch a vapor in a strong wind”.

Q: Why does Solomon summarize this section by basically stating that the acquisition of knowledge is never fully satisfying?

A: Can you name a single area of human knowledge that is complete? No matter the discipline, however far scientists or scholars increase the boundaries of what is known on a subject, it always creates more questions than answers. Are there more questions in the area of Astronomy today or less? Every earthly answer actually births multiplied new questions in its place.

Q: What is significant to keep in mind about Solomon’s basic approach?

A: In v.13 it is predicated on the action, “I set my mind”. Ultimately everything boils down not to a test of knowledge (the mind), but faith (the heart). This is why the disciplines of science, philosophy, and the humanities always and ultimately present more questions than they can ever answer because they universally reject faith.

Application: One of the most important lessons we should be getting from Ecclesiastes is that knowing God’s Word is no substitute for putting it into practice.
Read 2:1-3

Q: How would you characterize this search by Solomon?
A: It is the hedonistic search.

Q: Did Solomon just go wild and unrestrained here?
A: It’s important to note the context by which he undertook these pleasures, for according to v.3 he provides the caveat, “while my mind was guiding me wisely”. In other words, he is judging all pleasure within the context of God’s wisdom, by the measure of God’s Word and ways. It’s not the world’s standards he is employing, but God’s.

Q: Why might it be significant that one of the devices Solomon used was wine?
A: Under these conditions he is not speaking about drunken abandonment, but what we might call “good living, good eating and drinking” or enjoying the finer things in life.

Application: Yes, Satan completely and overtly enslaves some through the worst kind of addictions, but then there is his more subtle deception of using the things of this world “moderately”, even though in doing so they equally lead away from the Word and ways of God as effectively as full-on addiction.

Read 2:4-11

Q: How would you characterize this third search by Solomon?
A: The search through personal works.

Q: Into what two categories could this list of works be sorted?
A: Things contributing to material wealth and things contributing to personal pleasure.

Q: What is the important distinction Solomon makes in v.10 as the justification for the personal pleasures he indulged in?
A: “My heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor”.

Application: As the basis for this teaching, Solomon did not simply abandon everything for every imaginable physical pleasure, but engaging in what we might term as reaping the benefits of his hard work, of earning the right to enjoy what he has worked for. This is not the same as someone who abandons every restraint and rule to party full-tilt uncontrollably with no regard for the consequences.

Q: What was Solomon’s conclusion as to what all his exceedingly great works delivered in this life?
A: “There was no profit under the sun”. (v.11)

Application: Even the benefits of hard work can lead away from the Word and ways of God when exclusively performed for our self rather than others.

1 I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility. 2 I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” 3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding me wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

4 I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; 6 I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. 8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines.
Summary to This Point:

The three types of searches to understand the point of one’s labors in this life:

1. The intellectual search which typifies a search of the mind. (1:12-18)
2. The hedonistic search which typifies a search of the heart. (2:1-3)
3. The personal works search which typifies a search of the soul. (2:4-11)

These capture only the scope of this present life between birth and death.

Read 2:12-17

TQ: Following three searches by Solomon, he now presents three realizations he has come to. How would you characterize this first realization?
A: The same fate in this life awaits everyone, wise and fool alike – death followed by fading from the memory of the living.

Q: How would you characterize the central issue he is struggling with here?
A: It’s the question, “What is the lasting results of my time on earth?” This is compounded by his observation that the quality of one’s labors cannot change the inevitable outcome that death will end every life alike.

Q: This has been pointed out previously, but is important to keep in mind throughout Ecclesiastes: What is the very LIMITED context Solomon is using?
A: “Under the sun”. (v.17) He is speaking STRICTLY within the limits of our time on earth and what happens WHILE we’re pursuing the things of this life.

Realization #1: If the same fate awaits everyone, then the logical inference is there must be something greater at work than just the pursuits of this life.
Read 2:18-23

Q: How would you characterize Solomon’s second realization?
A: The benefits of this life’s works are inherited by those who never had to work for them.

Q: Solomon never directly uses the term, but what quality is it that is missing from the endeavors of this life? What is never attainable either through the accomplishment of personal works or passing on their legacy to another?
A: Peace. This is what is inferred by the repeated use of the word “striving” and assigning to it the end result of futility.

Point: There is no earthly peace in this present life due to the constant striving for personal results or the weight of worries of what will happen to those labors when passed on to the next generation.

Realization #2: There is no earthly peace due to the constant striving for personal results or the worries for the next generation.

Read 2:24-26

Q: How would you characterize Solomon’s third realization?
A: Whatever pleasant benefits are experienced in this life for the labors of this life, they are a blessing from God to be enjoyed in this life.

Q: Is Solomon saying that feeling good about doing God’s will is “vanity and striving after wind”?
A: No, this final sentence is connected to “the sinner”. As prefaced at the beginning of this section, enjoyment of this life is “from the hand of God” for the faithful Believer, but all life’s labors are “striving after wind” for the sinner.

Q: Previously Solomon compared the wise to the fool and the mad. How does he take this a step further to place the entire discussion in the proper spiritual context?
A: He ultimately compares and contrasts the Believer to the sinner. He ultimately ties everything back to whether or not, in the course and boundaries of this present life, one chooses God’s Word and ways over the world’s.

18Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. 19And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. 20Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. 21When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? 23Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

24There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. 25For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? 26For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God’s sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind.
Realization #3: The pursuits of this life are different for those who embrace God’s Word and ways versus those who do not.