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The Failure of Earthly Things

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-11

The failure of worldly things DIG: What does the word Qoheleth mean? Is discipleship a destination or a journey for you? Why do you think so? What does the phrase “under the sun” mean? What is the difference between looking “under the sun” and “above the sun?”

REFLECT: How do you try to escape life’s monotony and futility? When you come to the end of your life, or even to the end of this year, what will you have to show for all your hard work? How can you put **ADONAI** in the middle of the mundane things in your life?

One way to gain a divine perspective on life is to take all the things that make life so wearisome and see what a difference it makes when we bring God back into the picture.

The words of Qoheleth the son of David, king in Jerusalem (1:1).

Our guide on this journey in **Ecclesiastes** is called **Qoheleth**, or as we know **him** in English, **the Teacher**. Before we go any further it is important to clarify this man’s identity. The Hebrew root of the word *qoheleth* literally means *to gather or assemble*. Some take this as a reference to the way the author collected wise sayings. But in the TaNaKh the verbal form of this word typically refers to gathering a community of people, especially for the worship of **God**. Think of **Qoheleth** as a **teacher** speaking **wisdom** to the people of **God**.²³⁷

The predominant opinion of the past has always been that in **Ecclesiastes**, an old and repentant **Solomon** looks back over **his** life, particularly the period after **his** apostasy from **ADONAI** (**to see link click Bx -Solomon’s Wives**). A surface reading of the text supports this identification. These words seem most naturally to point to **Solomon**, the biological **son of King David**, who was a **king** living in **Jerusalem**, and who ruled the kingdom after **his father**.



Pointless (see [Ah - The Message of Ecclesiastes](#))! **Pointless!** - says the **Teacher - everything is pointless (1:1-2)**! Taken literally the word **pointless** (Hebrew: *hevel*) refers to a wisp of a vapor, a puff of **wind**, a mere breath - nothing you could get your hands on. The nearest thing to zero. That is the **pointlessness** that this book is all about.²³⁸ Life is like that: elusive, fleeting, **pointless**. It disappears as suddenly as it comes. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Thus, the Bible compares our mortal existence to a **mere breath (Psalm 39:5)**, or to a **mist that appears for a little while then disappears (James 4:14)**. **The Teacher** found that looking for the meaning of life was like chasing **the wind**. That frustrating image helps us understand **Ecclesiastes**. It is not that kind of book that we keep reading until we reach the end and get the answer, like a mystery. Instead, it is a book in which we keep struggling with the problems of life, as as we struggle, we learn to trust **ADONAI** with the questions even when we don't have all the answers. This is how the life of a believer works: it is not just about what we get at the end, but also about the people we become along the way. Discipleship is a journey, not just a destination.

Notice the vast scope of **the Teacher's** claim: **everything is pointless under the sun**, cutting **God** out of the picture. Not one single aspect of our existence **under the sun** is free from frustration and being **pointless**. To prove his point, **the Teacher** takes things that people ordinarily give meaning to or to find satisfaction and then shows how empty and **pointless** they really are. **He** speaks from experience, because **he** had tried it all: money, pleasure, knowledge, and power - all the things that we try (or are tempted to try) in order to bring satisfaction into our lives.

Some people try to find meaning in what they know, but **Ecclesiastes** says that **in much wisdom is grief; the more knowledge, the more suffering (1:18)**. Some people try to find satisfaction in all the pleasure that money can buy. **The**

Teacher was rich enough to build or buy anything **he** wanted, but at the end of **his** life he concluded that **there was nothing to be gained under the sun (2:11)**. So, **he** threw **himself** into **his** work, trying to accomplish something significant, but even that satisfaction was **pointless**.

Not even his great **wisdom** could save **his** desperate **heart**. Later in **his** book he will give us the testimony of a frustrated philosopher: **When I applied myself to gain wisdom and to observe how people occupy themselves on earth, that people's eyes don't see sleep either by day or by night, then, on looking over all of God's work, I realized that it is impossible to grasp all the activity taking place under the sun; because even if a person works hard at searching it out, he won't grasp it; and even if a wise person thinks he knows it, he still won't be able to grasp it (8:16-17)**. If we doubt the truth of this statement, all we need to do is ask the nearest professor and he or she will tell us the truth: **Pointless! Pointless! - says the Teacher - everything is pointless (1:1-2)!²³⁹**

Same old, same old: We begin to get a good sense of **Ecclesiastes** and its attitude about life from the question posed at the beginning of the book and the words that are offered by way of an answer: Here is the question: **What does a person gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun (1:3)?** Then comes the answer. **The Teacher** is making the case for the weary emptiness of our **pointless**, fleeting existence, and wondering why **he** should even bother.

In **verses 4** through **7** **he** looks at the elementary things of nature - **earth, air, fire** and **water** - and sees no real change anywhere. **Generations come, generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, the sun sets; then it speeds to its place and rises there. The wind blows south, then it turns north; the wind blows all around and keeps returning to its rounds. All the rivers flow to the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place where the rivers flow, there they keep on flowing.** The generations come and go, but **the earth** does not move. With weary monotony **the sun** rises and sets, rises and sets, rises and sets. **The wind** goes around and around in circles. **The water flows** forever into **the sea**. It is all the same as it ever was. **The Teacher** is tired of thinking about all of this. It's as if **he** was saying, "All of life is far more being than words could ever say."

So why bother? That is the question. Why keep running on the treadmill of our existence? In **verses 8** through **11**, **the Teacher** moves from the natural world to

human experience and sees the same thing that **he** saw with nature: things are done over and over again without any real profit or genuine progress. **Everything is wearisome, more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, the ear not filled up with hearing. What has been is what will be, what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there something of which it is** said: **See, this is new? It already existed in the ages before us. No one remembers the people of long ago; and those to come will not be remembered by those who come after them.** If **the sun, the wind,** and **the** mighty **rivers** have nothing to show for **their** constant motion, then what hope do we have of ever accomplishing anything in life?

Some people try to escape life's monotony and futility by filling their senses with what they see and hear. Today, we see an endless procession of visual images (YouTube, Instagram, Netflix) and listen to an endless stream of sounds (Pandora, Spotify, Apple Music), but we are never satisfied. There is always one more show to watch, one more game to play, one more song to listen to. What **Ecclesiastes** says is still true: **The eye is not satisfied with seeing, the ear not filled up with hearing (1:8).** We're insatiable in appetite. Even if we have seen before, we want to see more. But what do we really gain? What progress do we make in life, spiritually or otherwise?

We experience the same thing on the larger scale of human events: **What has been is what will be, what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun (1:9).** How is *that* for a philosophy of history - humanity on a hamster wheel? Future generations will suffer the same plight.

The Teacher makes such sweeping claims about future futility that we are tempted to try and think of a counter-example. Surely there must be at least one thing that is new **under the sun.** For a moment, the writer considers that possibility and asks: **Is there something of which it is** said: **See, this is new?** But just as quickly, **he** denies it. Whatever **seems new** has **already existed in the ages before us (1:10).**

The more things change, the more they stay the same. And if it ever seems like there really is something **new under the sun,** it is only because we have forgotten what happened before - the way people forget about us one day, when there is nothing left of us except a faded picture in a discarded scrapbook, or perhaps a digital image in a forgotten corner of cyberspace.²⁴⁰

All things new: Pointless! Pointless! - says the Teacher - everything is pointless! So why bother? This is the question that **Ecclesiastes** throws in our faces. We need to be careful because we could come to the conclusion that because everything in life is so **pointless**, so frustrating, that nothing really matters. Here today, gone tomorrow. We could conclude that it's the only honest view of life. And that would be true if we only look at life **under the sun**. This phrase occurs dozens of times in **Ecclesiastes**, and is one of the key phrases to understanding the book. **Under the sun** expresses the extent of the problem. Where do we experience life's futility and frustration? Everywhere **the sun** shines!

Yet, this phrase also opens up the possibility of a different perspective. To see things **under the sun** is to look at them from the ground level, taking a worldly viewpoint and leaving **ADONAI** out of the picture? If that is all we do, then we are bound to reach the conclusion that everything in life *is* so **pointless**, so frustrating, that *nothing* really matters. But, of course, that isn't the right way to look at things. Why? Because there is a **God** who rules over **the sun**. So we are not limited to the terrestrial; we can also get outside our own solar system and see things from a celestial perspective.

Ecclesiastes begs us to do that. It shows us the weariness of our existence so that we will not expect to find meaning and satisfaction from **earthly** things, but only in **God** above. Money, sex, power, achievement - none of these things satisfy - only **ADONAI** does. This does not mean, of course, that as believers we stop feeling the frustrations of life **under the sun**. We *do* feel it. But **Ecclesiastes** shows our need for an "above the sun" perspective that brings joy and meaning to life. One way to gain this divine perspective is to take all of the things that make life so wearisome and see what a difference it makes when we bring **God** back into the picture. **Ecclesiastes** looks at **earthly** things and fails to see any progress. But **the psalmist** looks at the same old **sun** and says it **comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy (Psalm 19:5)**. Whether **the sun** makes progress or not, it bears witness to the **joy** and **strength** of **its Creator**. Therefore, **from sunrise until sunset ADONAI's name is to be praised (Psalm 113:3)**.

Looking above the sun also gives us a different perspective on human experience. Is anything new? Maybe not **under the sun**, but the **God** who rules over **the sun** is always doing something new, especially in **Yeshua**. **YHVH** has made a **New Covenant** for us in **the blood of Messiah (Luke 22:20)**. So if we ask the question, "Why bother?" the answer is that we have a **Savior** who looked at all the

futility and frustration we suffer in this fallen world and chose to suffer it with us and for us so that **He** could actually do something about it.

Then there was a **new life** that came up from the empty tomb when **Yeshua** arose from the dead with the power of eternal salvation. There is the **new heart** that **God** gives to everyone who believes in **the Savior (Ezeki'el 36:26)**. There is the **new creation** that comes when **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** enters our minds and hearts (**Second Corinthians 5:17**). Once we give our lives to **Yeshua Messiah** it is never the same old, same old ever again. The living **God sits on the throne** of the universe and says: **Look! I am making everything new.** And one day, this great **God** will make a **new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1 and 5)**. In one of the earliest commentaries written on **Ecclesiastes**, Didymus the Blind wrote these enlightening words: A person who is enlightened by the "sun of righteousness" is not "under" it but "in" it. Thus, it is said in the Gospels, "The righteous will shine like **the sun** in the Kingdom of their **Father**, not **under the sun.**"

Almost every verse in **Ecclesiastes** shows how much we need a **Savior to make everything new**. So we need to remember this whenever we get frustrated, sad, angry or disappointed with everything in life that is getting broken, falling apart, and going wrong. Remember this when you feel overwhelmed and are tempted to wonder why you should even bother - with your work, with a relationship, with your faith. You were made for a **new** and better world. The very fact that you are weary of this life is pointing you to **Yeshua** as the only **One** who can satisfy your soul.²⁴¹

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, **You** are eternal - no beginning and no ending. **But ADONAI-Elohim is truth. He is the living God and eternal King. At His wrath the earth quakes and the nations cannot endure His indignation (Jeremiah 10:10).** How important it is to focus our energy and our eyes on living for **You** and realize that only what's done in **Messiah** will last!*

*May we be wiser than **Solomon** in that we focus our hearts on **You** dear **Father**, and live for pleasing **You** for all eternity. **Knowing that the One who raised the Lord Yeshua will raise us also with Yeshua, and will bring us with you into His presence. . . For our trouble, light and momentary, is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, as we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (Second Corinthians 4:14, 16-17).** I love **You God** and will fix my heart on living for **You** now, as I focus on*



*pleasing **You** for all eternity! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection.
Amen*