

Chapter summary – *Most of chapter one is an introduction to the book. Here we are told about the writer and who he is addressing, as well as his main theme which is “all is vanity,” (1:2). The final third of the chapter begins the writers report on the vanity of secularism.*

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I. the Introduction, (Ch. 1:1-11)

1. THE WRITER OF THE DECLARATION - (1:1, 12)

1) As he identifies himself

(1) He calls himself a preacher, (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10)

INTERPRETATION:

¹ **The words** (the declarations), **of the Preacher**, (or of the teacher of an assembly)

(2) He calls himself the son of David, (1:1 [cp., 1 Chron. 3:1-9])

the son of David, (which could be any one of his 19 sons or one of their descendants)

(3) He calls himself the a king of Israel, (1:1; 12)

king in Jerusalem, (a king of God’s people Israel).

Being a king over all of Israel and residing in Jerusalem (1:16; 2:7, 9), would mean that he was a king before the division of the kingdom, but after David. This limits us to only two options, Solomon and his son Rehoboam.

2) As most commentators identify him

Of the two men, Solomon and Rehoboam, Solomon better fits the description and the content of Ecclesiastes because of his great wisdom (1:16), numerous building activities (2:4-6), wealth (7-9), as well as his literary productions (I Kings 4:29-34; Prov. 10:1; 25:1; Song of Sol. 1:1). [Solomon probably] wrote this book at the zenith of his glory and power. Since his pagan wives turned his heart away from the LORD when he was old (I Kings 11:4), it appears that he was divinely inspired (12:9-11), to write this book shortly after he had completed his building projects (I Kings chs. 6, 7, with Eccles. 2:5; 5:1), about 940 b.c., midway [through] his forty-year rule, (I Kings 12:42).¹

¹ Floyd H. Barackman, “Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon,” Fall 1988, a class taught at Practical Bible College, Bible School Park, NY 13737, p. 3.

2. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE DECLARATION - (12:1, 12)

NOTES:

INTERPRETATION:

¹ Remember now your Creator **in the days of your youth**,...

¹² And further, **my son**, be admonished by these.

This could mean that Solomon is addressing his son Rehoboam, of which is the only son that Scripture mentions by name, (1 Kings 11:43). It could possibly as well mean all who were in their youth.

3. THE THEME OF HIS DECLARATION - (1:2)

INTERPRETATION:

² “**Vanity** (vapor, breath, a puff of wind), **of vanities** (and more wind),” **says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all** (everything without exception), **is vanity**, (nothing but wind).”² [verse 14 makes the point the teacher is trying to make here even clearer “**I have seen all the works that are done** (by man), **under the sun** (not above the sun!—in other words by man and for man [not by God and for God]); **and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind**,” (meaning everything done under the sun is filled with emptiness and futility [cp., 1:17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

The theme of this book now becomes very clear. God, through Solomon, is describing for us the inescapable futility, meaninglessness of living our life for ourselves and not with God and for God.

God confronted the southern tribe of Judah with this truth through Jeremiah in chapter 2:4-5. God said, “**Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord, “What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty?”**” (NASV) What did it get Judah? They lost everything, members of the family to death because of the war, the loss of every possession but the clothes on their backs, and were exiled from the promised land to become slaves in a foreign land.

F APPLICATION:

God warns us through the Apostle Paul and John that to set our eyes and affections predominately on what this world offers and promotes is wrong and will lead to futility! It won’t amount to a hill of beans in the end. That is, if you can even able to attain what you want and keep it that long.

Colossians 2:8 -- ***Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.***

1 John 2:17 -- ***And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.***

² Solomon uses the word vanity or vanities 37 times in 12 chapters. That is just over an average of three times per chapter.

Look around you and you will see all kinds of people from every level of intelligence, wealth, influence, education, upbringing, and ability—unsatisfied in life. Neither does their sex, color, looks, or age change anything. The time or place they were born makes absolutely no difference. Having any, few or many friends doesn't even change it. They are unsatisfied in life. Why? It is because God made man in His image (Gen. 1:26, 27), and until man takes on a life that fits that image (e.g., is in communion with God and is acquiring an appetite for the interests of God), he will always end up with a big void in his life. If he refuses to fit that image, he and life around him will be hollow, empty, confusing, even cruel and oppressive. Chasing after possessions, positions, wealth, pleasures, accomplishments or whatever, thinking it will finally make you happy, will only supply another nail for the coffin in which your happiness lies—lifeless and unresponsive no matter what you try to stimulate it with. Again you failed to resurrect it and now you feel more than ever that you will never be able too.

Illustration – Fill a Jar full of rocks. Dump small things in it but what can't fill voids. Hang things on the outside of the jar too. God has created man with certain universal needs, and if these needs are not satisfied deep and haunting voids are left. Dump water in, it fills every void. God's Spirit can do this. Take some of the rocks out and you can be even more filled with what the image of God represents. The goal is for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

We must remember as well that Solomon is no nut case here, he is no dummy or slouch. He's the smartest and wealthiest man on earth; to say nothing about being given the ability by God to speak divine revelation. All of his possessions, pleasures, personal abilities or enterprises could not fill the void.

Man says that he is in the process of evolution, always bettering himself. God is flatly telling us here, that man is in the process of circumvolution, (which is synonymous with words like rotation, cycle and revolution). Since the beginning of time man is caught in a perpetual cycle going absolutely no where without God. His life is filled with futility, meaninglessness. It's kind of like the dog chasing his tail. He's as busy as ever, but going nowhere and accomplishing nothing.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then this book urges you to do so without delay. Why? Because no matter how much wealth, education, or social prestige you may have, life without God is futile. You are only "chasing after the wind" if you expect to find satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the things of the world. "For what shall it profit a man, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" asked Jesus (Mark 8:36).³

When you belong to the family of God through faith in the Son of

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books) 1994, [Online] Available: Logos Library System.

God, life is not monotonous: it is a daily adventure that builds character and enables you to serve others to the glory of God. Instead of making decisions on the basis of the vain wisdom of this world, you will have God's wisdom available to you (James 1:5).⁴

God affirms this so very clearly in Jeremiah chapter 2. *Has a nation changed its gods, which are not gods? But My people have changed their glory for what does not profit. Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid; be very desolate,*” says the Lord. *“For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water.* (Jeremiah 2:11-13)

4. THE QUESTION OF HIS DECLARATION - (1:3-11)

1) The Question He Asks, (3)

INTERPRETATION:

³ **What profit**⁵ (advantage or benefit), **has a man** (left over), **from all his** (hard), **labor**⁶ **in which he toils under the sun**, (We are talking about a person living for himself and not for God. [It's like the song, “I did it my way,” according to my likes, desires, and goals; not God's])?⁷

2) He Illustrates the Question, (4-11)

(1) Through the activity of nature, (4-7)

⁴ **One generation passes away, and another generation comes** (a ceaseless cycle of living and dying human beings [their here today, but gone tomorrow]); **but the earth** (on the other hand), **abides forever**, (lives on providing the means for each consecutive generation, one after another). [*The old saying, “Just as sure as the world...”*]

⁵ **The sun also rises, and the sun goes down** (everyday), **and hastens to the place where it arose**, (to begin the monotonous cycle all over again—What advantage or benefit does it gain by all its labor?).

⁶ **The wind goes toward the south** (for awhile), **and** (then), **turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually** (always blowing one way or another somewhere on this planet), **and comes again on its circuit**, (to repetitiously begin again its transworld circuit—What advantage or benefit does it gain

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Logos Library System.

⁵ The idea being, “What is left over after the trisection is made?” “What do I get out of it? How will it benefit me after I die?”

⁶ His labor at work, to raise his children, to have a good marriage, to do well at school, his labor in every area of his life.

⁷ It suggests the troubled life of humanity in this world against the background of inevitable death [*one generation after another*] [*Have you ever asked Solomon's question? What is the advantage or benefit I receive by pouring my life into my marriage, my work, my children, my friendships, my studies, my possessions, etc.,?*] (Murphy Roland, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23a: Ecclesiastes*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998, [Online] Available: Logos Library System.) The phrase “under the sun” is mentioned 29 times throughout the book.

by all its labor?).

- ⁷ **All the rivers run into the sea, yet** (as they pour their bounty into it), **the sea is not full** (it is never satisfied and); **to the place from which the rivers come** (or begin), **there they return again**, (in a monotonous hydrological cycle—What advantage or benefit does it gain by all its labor?).

F APPLICATION:

There is a lot of commotion going on day after day, but no real promotion. It's just a repetitious cycle of the same old thing. There is no getting beyond what all have suffered in the past and are now suffering in the present. No one nor anything can escape the vexatious futile pathetic cycle of life under the sun. The hard work of the sun, wind, and rivers is completed everyday only to be obliterated at the end of the day and repeated the next day. What is the advantage or benefit of all its hard labor day after day? There is no benefit if it is done under the sun and thus without God.

(2) Through the activity of man, (4-7)

- ⁸ **All things** (*lit.* words), **are full of labor** (they result in nothing but weariness, exhaustion); **man cannot express it**, (it's not that man can't find the words to express what he wants to say, but that the words never fully achieve their purpose thus leaving us unsatisfied and disappointed [*e.g., advertisements, commercials, and how to do this or that seminars.*]). **The eye is not satisfied with seeing** (it never ceases to *look* for something more, something new, something different, something better—it's always on the prowl), **nor the ear filled with hearing**, (it never ceases to *listen* for something more, new, different, or better).
- ⁹ (The problem is), **That which has been** (that which has taken place in the past), **is what will be** (is what is going to take place in the future), **that which is done** (today), **is what will be done** (tomorrow—everything that takes place is nothing more than fruitless repetition), **and there is nothing new under the sun** (only an endless cycle of the same old thing—thus the words, eye and ear will never be satisfied. What advantage or benefit does one gain for all his talking, looking, listening and doing?!)
- ¹⁰ **Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"?** (No.) **It has already been in ancient times before us** (it's simply recycled with a new wrapper maybe, but it accomplishes the same thing).⁸

⁸ Dr. H.A. Ironside, longtime pastor of Chicago's Moody church, used to say, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new." Whatever is new is simply a recombination of the old. Man cannot "create" anything new because man is the creature, not the Creator. (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Logos Library System) But you say, "Pastor, there are a lot of new things today that weren't before! Like, planes, rocketships, computers, microwaves, medicines, television, radio, etc." This is true but they all simply serve the same old purpose like transportation, cooking, healing, computation and communication. A new means of simply doing the same old, same thing. Getting from point A to point B, putting something on the dinner table, making someone well, figuring 2+2, and giving someone a message; the same old, same old.

¹¹ **There is no remembrance of former things** (nobody cares a hoot about who did what, where, when, how and why—when a more up-to-date means arrives on the scene of doing something), **nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after**, (as the same thing will happen to them as their predecessors—they and their labor in every area will be forgotten too. It's all a futile repetition that every generation suffers from).⁹

F APPLICATION:

Everything man has ever done is constantly being obliterated; everything a man fights for and lives for passes [away]; he has so many years to live and then it is finished [*gone, forgotten forever*].¹⁰ If living under the sun is so crummy, what is the point of living at all?! [*Are there people asking that question today? Sure there are and the biggest group asking that question is our youth. Teen suicide is growing big time. It's no mistake that this book is addressed to our youth.*]

Why do they keep telling us to look for the light at the end of the tunnel? Why do people conduct great seminars all around the world and tell people to smile more, to believe "there's a bright, beautiful tomorrow . . . just grab for it . . . go for the gusto . . . hitch your wagon to a star . . . you'll make it someday"?

You know why they tell us those things? There's one simple answer: to make us believe there's purpose and happiness if we simply *keep on hoping* [*in ourselves. We just need one more lucky break. One more fancy gadget. One more job promotion. One more try at a relationship.*]

But hope cannot exist in a vacuum where facts are ignored. The fact is that the world is not wonderful. The world is wicked, corrupt, and depraved. And work isn't [all that] enriching and fulfilling; it's tiring and it's futile and it blows up in your face. People aren't kind and generous; people are selfish and cruel.

Life on planet Earth isn't a great big bowl of cherries; it's the pits. It is boring. It is empty. It is a grind. It is "chasing the wind." And to make matters worse, apathy rules! [*Who cares about anything?!*]

That's true if you're educated or untaught. That's true if you're young or old. It's true if you're a professional person or a blue-collar worker. It's true if you live in a penthouse or a little second-story flat. And it won't be different if your circumstances change. Don't believe me . . . believe God. And instead of blaming Him, realize He had a reason for our horizontal lives being so void of purpose.¹¹

⁹ The author denies any distinction between the past and the future. They are really the same; the future repeats the past. The sameness of yesterday and today is stressed in an Akkadian proverb: "The life of last night (is the same as) every day" (W. Lambert, *BWL*, 249). (Murphy Roland, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Logos Library System)

¹⁰ Chambers, Oswald, *Shade of His Hand*, (Hants RG23 7Lp, United Kingdom: Oswald Chambers Publications Association and Marshall Morgan & Scott) 1996, [Online] Available: Logos Library System.

¹¹ Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Raged Edge*, (Texas: Word Books), 1985, p. 25.

II. In Solomon's search for an answer to his question he examines secularism—but finds that it only leads to vanity, (Ch. 1:12-2:26)

1. SOLOMON DESCRIBES HIS APPROACH TO THIS STUDY OF SECULARISM - (1:12-15)¹²

1) He tells us His method of inquiry, (12-13a)

INTERPRETATION:

¹² **I, the Preacher, was** (have been and still am), **king over** (the nation of), **Israel in Jerusalem.**

¹³ **And I set my heart** (or my mind), **to seek** (*Heb.* means to investigate to the root of a matter), **and search out** (explore, meaning to examine all sides of a matter—in this case life lived under the sun), **by wisdom**

2) He tells us His purpose of inquiry, (13b)

¹³ **...I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done** (in the life of a person), **under heaven; this** (search for the reason for living is a), **burdensome task** (it is a miserable business that), **God has given to the sons of man** (to every human being born upon this earth), **by which they** (one and all), **may be exercised**, (be afflicted by asking and searching for the answer to this same question).

F APPLICATION:

Life is tough, but it is the gift of God (v. 13). He described life as a “sore travail” ... that only fatigues you... Of course, when God first gave life to man, the world had not been cursed because of sin (Gen. 3:14ff). Since the Fall of man, “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs” (Rom. 8:22, NKJV); this is one reason why life is so difficult. One day, when our Lord returns, creation will be delivered from this bondage.

[Warren Wiersbe comments that] While sitting in my backyard one evening, I heard a robin singing merrily from atop a TV aerial. As I listened to him sing, I preached myself a sermon:

Since early dawn, that bird has done nothing but try to survive. He's been wearing himself out hiding from enemies and looking for food for himself and his little ones. And yet, when he gets to the end of the day, *he sings about it!*

Here I am, created in the image of God and saved by the grace of God, and I complain about even the little annoyances of life. One day, I will be like the Lord Jesus Christ; for that reason alone, I should be singing God's praises just like that robin.¹³

NOTES:

¹² Dorothy Sayers wrote in one of her mystery novels, “There is nothing you cannot prove if only your outlook is narrow enough.” Solomon did not take that approach. (Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Logos Library System)

¹³ Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Logos Library System.

3) He tells us His purpose of inquiry, (2:3b)

³ **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** (or discover), **what was good for the sons of men to do** (to pour their life into), **under heaven all the days of their lives** (Solomon's purpose is to find the answer to the question of what makes life worth living in such a miserable world [Mic. 6:8]).

4) He tells us His motivation for his inquiry, (1:14, 15)

¹⁴ **I have seen all the works** (that comprise a human life), **that are done under the sun** (that are purely of human design and for human profit); **and indeed, all is vanity** (it amounts to nothing but a puff of wind), **and** (a futile), **grasping for the wind**.

¹⁵ **What is crooked** (in man and by man), **cannot be made straight** (he is unmendable thus his actions and thoughts are [*man himself is helpless in rectifying his sinful condition and actions*]), **and what is lacking** (in his person and actions), **cannot be numbered**, (cannot be calculated as the fall of man and thus the depravity of man is so complete).

F APPLICATION:

In short, Solomon is saying, “The past can't always be changed, and it is foolish to fret over what you might have done...”

We must remind ourselves, however, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and supply what is lacking. He cannot change the past, but He can change the way that the past affects us. For the lost sinner, the past is a heavy anchor that drags him down; but for the child of God, the past—even with its sins and mistakes—is a rudder that guides him forward. Faith makes the difference.

When He was ministering here on earth, our Lord often straightened out that which was twisted and provided that which was lacking (Luke 13:11–17; Matt. 12:10–13, 15:29–39; John 6:1–13). Man cannot do this by his own wisdom or power, but “with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37). Solomon was looking at these problems from a vantage point “under the sun,” and that's why they seemed insoluble.¹⁴

2. SOLOMON DESCRIBES HIS INVESTIGATION OF THIS STUDY OF SECULARISM - (1:16-2:16)

1) He investigated worldly wisdom and folly, (1:16-18)

📖 INTERPRETATION:

¹⁶ **I communed with my heart, saying** (to myself), “**Look**, (or

NOTES:

¹⁴ Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, Logos Library System.

observe), **I have** (personally), **attained greatness, and**

have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge,” (Solomon not only possessed a greater portion of wisdom than everyone else, he also did more to with it and gained a famous reputation for doing so).

¹⁷ **And I set my heart to know wisdom** (to intensify my personal involvement with it) **and to know madness** (I tried reasoning as a fool does), **and folly** (I sought to become involved in every pleasure available as well). (“The result of my investigation of these things,” Solomon says, “Is that), **I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind,** (it still results in leaving one empty, unsatisfied—it doesn’t accomplish deep down what you hope that it would—it doesn’t relieve depression or bring lasting happiness; it leaves you wanting more or something else).

¹⁸ **For** (the reason being), **in much wisdom is much grief** (it only serve to magnify your mental anguish), **and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow,** (increases his capacity for pain and discouragement).

F APPLICATION:

You have heard the old saying, “Ignorance is”... what? “bliss.” The reason being, “The more keenly one is aware of life’s questions and problems, the greater are his frustration and distress for his inability to answer and solve them.”¹⁵ He can’t make what is crooked straight and the more wisdom and knowledge he has the more crooks he recognizes in the road of life.)

Swindoll mentions two major lessons we can learn from the first chapter of Ecclesiastes. He says:

1. *If there is nothing but nothing under the sun, our only hope must be above it...* Most folks have their heads so firmly riveted to the here and now that they virtually ignore any other dimension in life.
2. *If a man who had everything, investigated everything visible, ...then the one thing needed must be invisible...* His name is Jesus Christ. He wants to rule your life. Why should apathy rule if He is available?¹⁶

NOTES:

¹⁵ Barackman, “*Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*,” p. 5.

¹⁶ Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Raged Edge*, p. 36, 38.