

Ecclesiastes: What Is It All About? (Part 1)

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It is fairly well known by most of us, that as many churches do to this very day, the Jews devised a system of reading through the Bible by assigning certain scriptures to be read that they believed to be appropriate for specific days and specific times during the year. I believe that system required three years for them to fulfill the full cycle. Then, the reader reverted back to the beginning scriptures and began through the cycle once again.

After careful consideration of the subject material of many books, the Jews assigned specific books to be emphasized on specific festivals. For example, Ruth was to be read and expounded upon by the Rabbis on the Feast of Firstfruits. To them, it pictured God opening the door of conversion to the Gentiles.

What do you believe was the book assigned for the Feast of Tabernacles, by the Jews? It was Ecclesiastes. You might say, "What does Ecclesiastes have to do with the Feast of Booths?" Does Tabernacles not picture a time of abundance portraying God's blessing as shown by the abundant harvest He provided? What does Ecclesiastes have to do with harvests? Well, as far as I know, the word harvest does not even appear in the book. Neither does the word booth, booths, tabernacle, or tabernacles; but, there are harvests of things other than what grows out of the earth.

Does the New Testament not say that our bearing much fruit glorifies God? The New Testament lays a great deal of stress on the development of spiritual fruit. Fruit figuratively symbolizes qualities that in the long run are far more important to life than the harvests of the fruits of the earth.

Ecclesiastes has much to do with the focus and quality of life that spiritual fruit springs from. Ecclesiastes is not an easy book to grasp except at its very lowest level and that level occurs when we break it into isolated verses or a series of isolated thoughts in the same manner as we commonly do with Proverbs. But brethren, Ecclesiastes is a far different work than Proverbs.

Though both books are considered wisdom literature, their roles are far different. Ecclesiastes can most certainly be used in the same manner as Proverbs by breaking it into small pieces but it is far more complex than Proverbs; even though the reality it is addressing is actually fewer in terms of major thoughts. It requires a great deal more

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sustained, thoughtful meditation to get the abundant, spiritual meat this book has for all of us regardless of how long we have been converted.

What is Ecclesiastes' purpose in God's plan? How does it apply to us? As we begin, I am going to lay a foundation that I hope will be clear in the end. And brethren, I have no idea when the end is going to be. It will not be at the Feast of Tabernacles because there is so much in this book it is incredible. And yet, it is one we hardly ever pay any attention to except for isolated verses every once in a while. This book was written specifically for the sons of God, for His children in the faith, and it has a very urgent message for every one of us.

Ecclesiastes makes clear to the sons of God that there are specific choices to be made in life if one is serious about being in God's Kingdom. I will be blunt. In life's choices regarding being prepared it is either God's way or the world's. It is one or the other. It is either God's way or man's. It is either the way of faith or the way of sight.

We are going to follow the clear delineations in this book if we are wise. The more we choose the world's way, the more meaningless life becomes both in quality as lived now, and in quality of the finished product when death arrives and our judgment by God is concluded. The wilderness trek of the children of Israel was intended to prepare them for the Promised Land. But, their record is clear. The overwhelming number of them did not choose to live by faith in God and they failed utterly to take advantage of that pilgrimage. That trek of those people stands as a witness to every one of us. There is one way; it is God's way. I am not going to say that we make the right choices all the time because we do not, but I certainly hope that our batting average is going to be a lot higher than the Israelites' in terms of living by faith and choosing the way. Though it may be difficult, though it may be scary, though we may carry doubt in our mind, it is still the best way.

If we choose the other way, we are just setting ourselves back. Because you know that God will turn us right around and He is going to make us go that way again to see what we choose the second time around and the third time around. He is pretty patient.

Ecclesiastes is designed like a college classroom lecture given by God using Solomon's life experiences. The lecture is on how to be a success in this way of life on its most basic level. None of us can live life as grandly as Solomon did but, nonetheless, Solomon's analyses and conclusions again, though blunt, are exquisitely clear. The principles contained within his experiences are applicable to any life lived at any level including our level right on up to Solomon's grand level.

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This might seem like a dumb question at this time—I have used Solomon's name so many times assuming that he is the author but this point is pretty important: Who is the book's author? This is important because instruction originating from someone of rank in our eyes and known to have had experience in this subject is far more authoritative and acceptable than the same instruction given by a nobody. So Ecclesiastes addresses this most of the way through the book, but nonetheless it is addressed, so let us begin in Ecclesiastes 9.

Ecclesiastes 9:15–16 Now there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then I said, 'Wisdom is better than strength.' Nevertheless, the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words not heard.

God is the overall author but He did this through a man who has experienced firsthand what is written herein. In addition, this man carefully observed what others did, and equally and carefully analyzed the fruit of their conduct and attitudes. Let us go back to the front of the book; the very beginning.

I should interject here, that most of this sermon is going to be spent on laying a foundation. A good, strong foundation is something to work from that we can build on. You will find that if you get the foundation of this book down and you get his terms organized in your mind, you can define things as he goes through the book and really begins to give us the meaty conclusions that he reaches at certain points.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastes 2:9 So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained within me.

Twelve times the author mentions the king but not once is Solomon ever directly named. That might seem strange. This and a few other things give rise to thoughts by some commentators that Solomon is not the author but rather what we are looking at is a biography. A biography that is based on notes recovered from Solomon in some way.

This thought is also formed around a reality that much of the language in Ecclesiastes is

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Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) from periods later in Judah's history. When did Solomon live? He lived in the 10th century B.C. and much of the language in the book is about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah which was about 400 years later. One additional fact to this is that the ending of the book is obviously an added part of the book. If Solomon was not the author, then this added part concludes that in verse 9 of Ecclesiastes 12.

Ecclesiastes 12:9 And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

Notice the shift to third person here. The preacher is not "I." Now, the preacher is "he"; "he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered." It is obvious that somebody is talking about the author rather than the author talking about himself.

Ecclesiastes 12:10-11 The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and what was written was upright—words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads...

I really do not want to go any further there; we will get back to that in a little bit. Notice in verse 11, "...the words of the wise..." is one phrase and at the end of the verse, notice the words, "...given by one shepherd." It appears as we go along that Solomon indeed is the author. "The wise" is implying Solomon as shown in verse 9, "And moreover, because the Preacher was wise..." so we know that the preacher was wise. Solomon was noted for his wisdom and the "one shepherd" in verse 11 is undoubtedly God.

When I put all these things together, it leads me to believe that the book is indeed originally authored by Solomon but that some words of the original script were updated through the years because of minor changes in the language. This happens to all living languages. A word from our experience is "gay." Look how the meaning of that word has changed over the last 20 years.

That happens to every language that is living; words have to be updated and replaced because the old word is no longer used by the people who are going to be reading the book in this generation. God edited the book, probably around the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah. Because God was on the job, He made sure that the right words were replaced and the intent and meaning of what Solomon wrote in the very beginning is retained—even though the words no longer fit what was originally written because the language has subtly changed.

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I believe that the book is indeed originally authored by Solomon but some words of the original script were updated through the years because of minor language changes. However, the One Shepherd is the one who inspired and oversaw all. So in reality, God is the author but he used Solomon in his experiences because Solomon was very familiar with them and he could add a personal touch to the things here because he had experienced them.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Now, we are going to spend some time on this word “preacher.” It is translated of the Hebrew term transliterated into English as “ko-hay-leth” (*qoheleth*). The emphasis is on the middle section, “hay”. The term is the title given to a speaker who calls for an assembly. The Greek word for “assembly” is “Ecclesia” which gives us the English title for the book Ecclesiastes. So what does Ecclesiastes mean? It has something to do with an assembly; such as what we have here.

Ecclesiastes 12:9 And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out, and set in order many proverbs.

I want you to notice two things: the first is that this editorial edition to the book refers to the preacher, that is *qoheleth*, calling him wise, and that he arranged many proverbs in order. "Proverbs" is not a reference to the book of Proverbs. It is a reference to what is contained within the book of Ecclesiastes.

What is he telling you? The book of Ecclesiastes is written in the way that it was written because Solomon put everything in order; there is a train of thought that goes from the beginning to the end. It is not to be broken up into a lot of little pieces like the book of Proverbs.

Remember, he is giving a lecture and it is sustained with one major point of focus that goes from beginning to end. There are quite a number of secondary important points and those are almost important as the primary point. There is hardly any difference between the level of what is most important and those things that are secondary.

It is important that we understand that there is one central theme from beginning to end. I wonder how many of you have ever read the book of Ecclesiastes with that thought in mind? There is one central message here. What Solomon intends—what God intends—i:

Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) that this theme is to be examined and conclusions drawn and if we do it right, they will be in an orderly manner.

He is telling us that this book, this lecture, is assuredly not a helter-skelter writing. It is beautifully and effectively arranged but it does require thoughtful work, meditation, and study. It is not something that is right on the surface. Themes that are within it, the one major one and the secondary themes, are things that have to be thought through with the purpose of, "How can I put this into work in my life so that I can glorify God, and I can be pleasing to God, and I can produce, by means of God's Spirit, a great deal of fruit?"

The root of the word *qoheleth* has the sense of gathering, collecting, or assembling. However, in the actual day-to-day usage, *qoheleth* is a title that fits two common professions. The word also has the sense of one calling an assembly and it even carries within it the sense of debating. However, in this case, the debating is not with others, but within the mind as Solomon meditates and considers all of the pros and cons of any given subject that he is considering.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, *qoheleth* shares his internal debating with us. He then processes the pros and cons and the combination of these inferences and usages fits the job description of a preacher or a teacher, and I think that you will find that most translations refer to *qoheleth* as the preacher. That is what it does here in the New King James that I am using and that is an appropriate use of the word *qoheleth*.

What we have here, is the professor of religion giving a lecture to the students in his class. The theme of the book is one that gives a strong impression that it would be written toward the end of one's life and this is one of the strongest clues that Proverbs and the Song of Songs, which Solomon also authored, were written early in his reign when he was *fully* walking with God. Ecclesiastes appears to have been written near the end after he had fallen into idolatry, but some see some hopeful signs within it that perhaps there might even have been a repentance.

What is the preacher saying in this book? This might be expressed in a number of ways so I am going to give you three of them here. The first is one of the more common ones and that is, "What is the meaning of life"? This is the broadest and most general of the possibilities. This one somewhat assumes that the author has no idea.

The second is this: Is it possible for a person to find satisfaction or fulfillment in living life? (Fulfillment meaning a sense of well-being.) This one assumes that the author has knowledge of life's purpose but finds living in this world really frustrating. That is

Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) something that could happen to any of us. We do know the meaning of life and we might get very frustrated by the way things are going.

The third one is this: Is life really worth living and if so, what should its orientation be? What should its focus be? This also assumes that the author knows and is analyzing his options to find the best way and then pass them on. I believe this third one is the one that I prefer as the best of these three.

Three commentators that I used gave the following subheadings for the entire book of Ecclesiastes hoping to give purpose and direction to our thinking as we study. The first one was: be satisfied. That is brief and to the point. The second was: chasing after meaning. The third one is the one that I believe is the best: why everything in life matters. That one is weighty.

Why everything matters suggests to us a major reason why; and here it is. (This is a compilation of my thoughts after trying to study through the book of Ecclesiastes and I have not gotten done yet; I did not have enough time to finish it.) Why does everything matter? Because the gift of life from God is precious. The gift of God's calling is precious beyond speculation. Make the most of what you have been graciously given and that is why everything matters.

Do we appreciate what we have been given? Especially with the calling and the opening up of our minds of what the purpose is, and what God has put before us, and the gifts that God gives to us to enable us to achieve as much as we possibly can? **He does not hold back from anyone who is one of His family.** Because of these great gifts, *everything matters. Take life seriously.* In John 10 we will read where it says that; Jesus is speaking:

John 10:10 The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

What a promise! I believe that Solomon wrote to help us understand what will happen to us in life if we choose what the world tries to offer instead of what God has to give. Now this, over the course of life, is what choosing is all about. Solomon had a relationship with God that he allowed to deteriorate. Solomon had much money, enjoyed many pleasures, possessed more human wisdom than anyone in the world but everything it seems ended in frustration. In this book, he seems to be saying, why make your own mistakes when you can learn from an expert like me?

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The book is teaching us how to live for God, not just for ourselves. It is very honest about life and its difficulties, and through Solomon's meditations he generally makes clear the choices he is urging us to make. Let us continue by going to the end of the book in Ecclesiastes 12.

Ecclesiastes 12:11 The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails given by one Shepherd.

Solomon explains how he wrote Ecclesiastes. Remember I said earlier that he arranged this in order. Remember he is the wisest man ever to live outside of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he sought out the best words and arranged them in the best order as he wrote, as it says in this verse, he included goads to prod us in our meditation. Every possible specific answer is not given but he provides the general path for our choosing, and also he says he gave nails on which to hang practical conclusions and, in addition, all of this was under the direction of the one Shepherd; that is God.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 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? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, and yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, and that which is done is that which will be done, and there nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has been already 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.

These first 11 verses set the tone for the entire book and then expand it out a bit, and the first two chapters lay the foundation for the remainder of the book. It is important that we begin to get the terms that Solomon used very, very frequently in the book and his first 11 verses are exceedingly important.

Two terms appear here: vanity and under the sun. They form the foundation on which

Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) most of Solomon's thinking is based. The reasoning base of virtually everything he says in the rest of the book is in these terms unless he tells us otherwise.

Vanity is not all that easy to pin down in terms of a very easy definition because it expresses a complex concept that is not all that easy to grasp. The Hebrew word is *hebel* or sometimes "hevel". It is the root of the name Abel as in Cain and Abel, the second born of Adam and Eve.

Hebel is difficult because it is what one commentator called a multipurpose metaphor. It is a shape shifter. In other words, it easily changes shape depending on the context in which it appears. It is somewhat important to get a grasp on it because Solomon used it 38 times in these 12 chapters. Its simplest meanings are: emptiness, futility, vapor, and breath.

The more difficult part to remember is that the word also carries with it an emotional quality. That feeling, that emotional quality is one of bitterness, despair, dejection, hopelessness, and bleakness. *Hebel* carries with it a sense of emotional pain often of disgust, frustration, weariness, without hope of fulfillment.

The preacher helps us here by using a modifier. Often it will appear with the term vexation or troublesome. Life is not merely like a short lived vapor, it is also troublesome. And that is disturbing to think about.

Now, Solomon agreed with his father, David, so we are going to look at a couple of things that David said where he used this word *hebel*.

Psalm 39:5-6 Indeed, you have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You. Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor [*hebel*]. Selah. Surely, every man walks about like a shadow; surely, they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them.

Think about this. Neither of those have much substance.

Psalm 78:33 Therefore their days He consumed in futility [*hebel*], and their years in fear.

So God fulfilled their days with something that was useless. We will look at another one;

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I was going to take you to Job 7:7. Job does not actually use *hebel* there but the context does include the word “breath” which brings us very close to exactly the same sense of briefness and meaninglessness of *hebel*.

I want to go back into the book of James so we get a New Testament reference. *Hebel* is not used but James does give us a sense that means the same thing.

James 4:13-14 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit;” whereas, you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

That is the New Testament equivalent of *hebel*. Now back to Ecclesiastes 1. We are going to continue on *hebel*. I am going to give you some quotes from some Bibles other than the New King James or King James Version that most of us use so that you will get a sense of how others have translated this word. So that you get a feeling for what Solomon is saying here in Ecclesiastes, the second verse, about what life is like.

The Message Bible, a modern paraphrase, translates “vanity of vanities” as “smoke”.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (MSG) Smoke, nothing but smoke, there is nothing to anything. All of life is smoke.

That gives you a pretty good idea of what the word *hebel* means. What good is smoke?

Vanity of vanities is a superlative. It is similar, in this respect, to Holy of Holies. This is the holiest of all. Or the Song of Songs; this is the greatest song of them all. There are some authors who begin their books with really catchy opening statements. Dickens, “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times” the sentence goes on but already you get a period of time that is in turmoil. Some of it is good, some of it is bad. The Bible itself, “In the beginning, God”. That is pretty hard to top.

Vanity of vanities fits into that kind of opening where, if you understand what the word “vanity” means, Solomon’s got your attention. This may not interest you, but I happened to think of a survey that was made by a group of people of literary notoriety. These were supposed to be people who had read just about every book that was ever written and they began to put together what they thought were the books that had the greatest opening comments of any book that they had ever read. Do you know what

Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) came in first place? The book of Hebrews. That is a great beginning to any book. Now, Ecclesiastes fits in with that; this is a superlative opening.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (MSG) Smoke, nothing but smoke, there is nothing to anything. All of life is smoke.

The NIV translates it this way:

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NIV) “Meaningless! Meaningless!”, says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (Moffatt) Utterly vain, utterly vain. Everything is vain.

Can you see the emotional content of that word? Despair is the way this book opens. I can add a little bit more because *hebel* expresses briefness along with absurdity and futility accompanied by emotional pain boxed in without hope. One commentator described *hebel* as being what is left over after a soap bubble bursts. That got your attention. You know how much is left there. I thought that was a great one.

If we want to take this to an extreme, Solomon begins this very serious book by saying life is like what is left after a soap bubble bursts. In other words, he is saying, at the very beginning, can there possibly be anything good that can come from it? Do not give up on him yet because he has just begun but perhaps he has got your attention.

Let us go to verse 3. We are going to do that because the next word that we are going to look at is in that verse. It is the word “profit”.

Ecclesiastes 1:3 What profit has a man of all his labor in which he toils under the sun?

We examine profit because Solomon put an awful lot of work into this—and mean a lot of time consuming work—introducing these evaluations about life. The word itself is rather simple. It is simply the Hebrew *yithron*. It basically means: that which is left over. Does that not fit well with the soap bubble analogy?

But this has an entirely different meaning to it because in most Bibles they translate it as profit. It is not profit, that which is left over from one’s labors or from one’s income. It

Ecclesiastes: What is it All About? (Part 1) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) means that which is left over and it appears 10 times in Ecclesiastes. It may be translated as surplus, advantage, gain, or profit and its most important role in Ecclesiastes is that in many cases it is almost an exact opposite of the word *hebel*.

We should begin by asking the question: Is there anything to be gained by working toward exhaustion when life is like a broken soap bubble? You have got to remember that Solomon was a bottom line man. He was not a man that was accustomed to failure. He wanted to see if there was going to be any profit in life, so he was going to analyze things before he allowed himself to actually get into this thing full bore. There is no doubt that he was willing to work hard but, like anybody who was investing his time and effort, he wanted to be reasonably sure that it would be profitable, otherwise it was going to be simply a waste of time. He was not a time waster. You should know that just knowing Solomon's life. Now, stop and think, just a little bit.

Apply this thought, right now, to your life under Jesus Christ. Is what I am doing profitable toward the Kingdom of God? Or are you wasting a lot of time doing nonessential things that could be spent doing other things that were going to produce fruit that would be pleasing to God and that would be glorifying to Him? Solomon wanted to find that out. How can this thing be profitable?

The next word is *labor*. Eleven different Hebrew words are used in the Old Testament and this particular word is in Ecclesiastes 1:3. Transliterated, it is *amal*. This appears in Deuteronomy 26:7 and in Psalm 90:10. I want to go to Psalm 90 because it is very appropriate. Richard just said that is his favorite psalm and we are going to steal something right out of the middle of it.

Moses wrote Psalm 90. Now, think of this in terms of your life. Think of this in terms of what Solomon is saying here. Is it going to be profitable? How much labor am I going to put into this?

Psalm 90:10-12 The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So, teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

That last bit of advice from Moses is: Teach us to put our days in order. He is saying, "Let's not waste any time." Prioritize. Let us do first things first, second things second, and third things third, but I think that if we will evaluate our lives, we find that we live life

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pretty much in a helter-skelter way.

You can begin to see the mind of Solomon here. He did not want to waste any time. He wanted what he was going to do to produce a profit for him. I do not know that he was considerate of others, but he wanted a profit for himself and he was willing to work and to work hard to produce that profit. And, like we see here for Moses, he wanted to put everything in order to prevent any missteps and just waste time going left then right, then left, then right. Like I said, this book is loaded with information. We are learning from the king, in this case.

His case at this point in time, very early in the book, seems to be not very positive. In all the descriptive terms he has used, not one of them has been encouraging. Why, then, should everything matter?

The next phrase is very important. Next to vanity, it might be about the most important term in this book. Important in terms for you and me to understand the way things are put. It is important because it provides the location and much of the perspective for, and where all of this meaninglessness is taking place. The next phrase is: under the sun. What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?

This phrase is used 29 times by Solomon in Ecclesiastes and this term must be considered in our thinking if we are going to understand the counsel in this book. A clear distinction is provided by looking at how the apostle Paul viewed things from his perspective and we are going to go back to Ephesians 1. Notice the way Paul wrote this:

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places [over the sun] in Christ.

Ephesians 1:20 Which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.

Paul also says this in Ephesians 2:6 and in Hebrews 3:1. "Under the sun", defines how Solomon perceived things. "Heavenly" defines how the apostle Paul perceived things. Unless Solomon tells us otherwise, "under the sun" tells us that things are being perceived as the natural man would, as the unconverted would, or as carnality still within us would, or as one would perceive life without the faith of God, or even as a weak faith would.

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Can you see the difference? People who have the spirit of God and who are striving to please God are always going to take God's heavenly things into consideration. Solomon is telling us that he did not.

"Heavenly", would be the same as the phrase "over the sun". It equates with perceiving life and all of its events from a spiritual or Godly point of view. With that in mind, you can begin to see why the book is written the way it is. In one sense, it is a downer because he is looking at things carnally; as someone who is carnal and at the same time has a brilliant mind.

He could not see it. He could not get it. He could not really grasp the spiritual element of life that makes it so important. Now, here you are, you do not have the mind of Solomon in terms of its brilliance, in terms of its ability to think things through and to reason. You do not have that mind; I do not have that kind of mind. But I do have the Spirit of God and you have the Spirit of God. That Spirit of God that we have enables us to look beyond the sun and into the heavenly just as the apostle Paul did.

Did he not tell us in Colossians 3 to think on those things that are above where Christ sits at the right hand of God? Just because Solomon thought the way he did does not mean that he cannot have good advice. There is very good advice in there but what we have to do, in many cases, is turn it on its head and put into a spiritual realm and then it begins to fit. Like I said a little bit earlier, he is saying to us, "Why should you make your own mistakes when you can learn from my mistakes"?

In a sense, the point of the entire book can be summed as saying: It is only as a person takes into account that which is *over* the sun as well as that which is *under* the sun that things under the sun are able to be seen in their true light. This is worthless, this is vanity, this might be more difficult but it is valuable. It is over the sun and it is right. It is going to be more difficult; it is going to require faith on my part. I am going to have to trust God but this is the choice I am going to make and it is the hard one but it is the right one.

That, in a sentence or two, is what Solomon is teaching us. He is teaching us how to make the right choices. Brethren, there may not be very much in all of our lives that is more important than making right choices. When we reach a point like this is when we, the sons of God, have the best opportunity to make the right choices in life.

There are two more thoughts regarding "under the sun". The first is: Do not think that the preacher, Solomon, ever completely lost sight of things over the sun. Remember, this man was probably pretty converted at the beginning of his life and he was losing it.

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He had lost a great deal of it by the time he was in his old age and nearing 70 years of age but he had not lost the whole thing yet. There were things that he still did see, grasp, and understand, and by those things, I mean God's truth but under the sun is where our problems are taking place. Therefore, it is there that most of his attention must be paid if his experiences are going to provide the best help for us; and he wants us to be given the best opportunity, the best chance of overcoming the vanity of carnality in this life for us.

Ecclesiastes 1:13 And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. [Incidentally, that word means afflicted; it is kind of interesting.]

The word this time is the word "evil". It appears for the first time in verse 13 where it is translated in the King James as "sore travail", or in the New King James as "burdensome task." This one is not easily spotted but it is used 31 times in Ecclesiastes and besides "sore" and "grievous", it may also be translated as: mischievous, adversity, wickedness, and misery. It is the opposite of good. It covers a multitude of things such as: pain, sorrow, hard circumstances, and distress within a given context. It is one of Solomon's favorite words for describing life as he sees it under the sun.

We are going to jump to the second chapter, verse 24, to the next word. It is the word "joy".

Ecclesiastes 2:24 There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good from his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God.

With the word "enjoy", we must not allow ourselves to be persuaded that Solomon was a wet dishrag or some kind of a spoil sport; not at all. Solomon was thoroughly honest and realistic as he describes things. What he said there was absolutely right; God intends that we enjoy life and the gifts that He gives to us.

We must add to that because most of what happens under the sun seems to be almost a total downer, however some form of joy is mentioned 17 times in Ecclesiastes and he admonishes us rather frequently to be realistic about it. Enjoy God's gifts. Life is short and life is indeed difficult so make the very best use of it while time remains.

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The next combination we are going to take together: wisdom and folly. There are 32 references to either folly or being fools but there are 54 references to wisdom—The most references of any of these words, which is more than enough to counterbalance both foolishness and folly.

For us, one must always consider that, ultimately, this book is intended for God's children and the problem is that carnality within us desires to head straight for foolishness and choose it rather than godly wisdom. Godly wisdom would include within it that which is in the dimension above the sun to guide God's children's choices. Right here is where the rubber hits the road. Which will we choose?

Our final two words as we continue to lay the foundation of this message are: God and man. Solomon mentions God 40 times. This is very interesting. Without deviation, he always uses the Hebrew, *Elohim*; never any other name of God or title of God. He does not use *Yahweh*, ever. He always uses *Elohim*. *Elohim* specifically designates the Creator. In Genesis 1, *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.

Why was Solomon so consistent in the use of the word *Elohim*, or Creator? I think he recognized that God has never stopped creating. He is still creating. He knew a great deal about what life was like or was for. He understood that God was recreating Himself in us. The creation was going on and he felt that *Elohim* conveyed that thought to you and me better than any other term or title of God would. Again, this is appropriate because Solomon's perspective is under the sun, and that is within what can be seen of what the Creator has made.

"Man" in the book is *adama* in Hebrew and in this writing, made in the image of God, but always implying under the sun, the natural, carnal, man was created by God.

An additional comment that I have on Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 involves the world famous evolutionist and atheist, Richard Dawkins, of whom some of you may have heard. He concluded this, "Human existence is neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous, indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose".

Solomon begins his quest with somewhat the same approach by giving a series of illustrations that portray life under the sun as being lived in an endless cycle or series of cycles that seem to have no beginning or ending. They just continuously operate without any destination.

To counteract this in a bad way, pagan Greeks tended to look at time as being circular. That is, the same things happen in a regulated order over and over again. Hebrew

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thought on this matter was much more linear. Because they had some revelation from God, time went forward and backward in a straight line; wherever you were, eternity backward; wherever you were, eternity forward.

You will see as we progress through the book that Solomon has somewhat of a blend of this thought. Yes, some things are repeated over and over again, but on the other hand, life and time are definitely moving somewhere. With the pagan Greeks, time never went anywhere. It just went in circles and the same things kept happening over and over again.

That is the way people under the sun reason. People of God, who have some revelation, they know that, yes, history does repeat itself. There are cycles that are in operation in nature but at the same time, history, time, and life, is moving on a straight line in some direction and it is up to us to make sure it goes in the right direction especially after God reveals Himself.

The Hebrew thought is that time is not as rigidly fixed as it might appear to the carnal from under the sun once one has the revelation of God. What Solomon is saying in these first 8 or 10 verses is that the true explanation for there even being a magnificent creation for the very purpose of life, the reason for living cannot be discovered and determined from the automatic operations of natural laws. Nature by itself does not tell us why we are here.

That is what the atheist was not able to give a good answer to; he just said there is no reason for life. Generations come and generations go, that is what Solomon is saying. The sun comes up, the sun goes down, the wind blows north, the wind blows south. The rivers run incessantly into the sea but the sea never gets full. He is expressing his frustration and wonder and many, many peoples' frustration that they have no control over what is going on in nature. Just like this very intelligent atheist, he does not know beans compared to you. "Human existence is neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous, indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose."

In one sense, brethren, this is what separates the converted from the unconverted. The unconverted keep seeing things that are under the sun and it leads nowhere. The converted can not only see things under the sun, but they can also see things above the sun. They know by revelation that life is headed somewhere. What then is the conclusion?

The conclusion is that the pagans are *partly* right. The Hebrews were *mostly* right but even the Hebrew direction of their thought had to be interrupted by God intervening in a

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person's life to enable His light to be full so that he can see both at the same time and until we can see both at the same time we have no hope of making right choices that will lead to life. This begins to give you the shape of Solomon's thoughts and to why so much of the book seems to be a downer, because he admitted right from the beginning that he is seeing things from under the sun and so he is extremely honest.

If you are looking at things under the sun then all that you are ever going to come up with, as far as life is concerned, is that life is like a soap bubble that just broke. It is all smoke. It is not going anywhere. It is vanity, it is despair, it is meaningless, it is frustrating. Why were you born? Do you know?

Ecclesiastes 1:12-17 I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed all is vanity and grasping for the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered. I commune with my heart saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.

With these verses, we can make a more complete statement regarding what he has written in this opening chapter. The opening illustrations give the sense that Solomon is saying that life is being lived in circles. Understand that this is just a general overview, but it is important to his search. He is saying that in life there is constant motion but the direction never really changes. Constant repetition is the order of the day regardless of when one lives. Again, this is the way things look under the sun.

Within this constant repetition, nature is permanent but man is transient. He is born, he lives, and he dies century after century without ever getting out of his rut. It is at this point a bleak outlook, but it is essentially correct as long as you are looking under the sun.

In addition to that, he says that nothing is new. He is not thinking about technological development; he is talking about life. Mankind is attracted to new things but those things really do not change life in terms of what Solomon is seeking, and that is purpose to life. Perhaps worst of all, nothing seems to be understood despite all the activity on earth.

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Verses 13 through 15 are especially interesting. In verse 13, Solomon is saying that God purposely designed and placed this futile, seemingly meaningless, and challenging environment for man to live in to be confronted by and to overcome. Did you hear what I said? God did this *purposely*. I am going to show you that the apostle Paul agrees with this in Romans 8.

Romans 8:18-20 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility. . .

Do you understand that? It was *subjected* to futility purposely by God. *God purposely makes life difficult*. Why? In a way, we can say that it is for His own children. He wants His children to meet these challenges, live in them, and overcome them. It is a job He has given us to do in order to be prepared to live in His Kingdom. God wants problem solvers in His Kingdom. People who met seeming disasters, challenges in life, and in a sense, though it was difficult for them to go through, they did it. They overcame the challenges.

God did not make life to be a bed of roses. When He took the children of Israel out of Egypt, He had a perfect opportunity to give them a life that was a bed of roses. What did He do? He gave them a life that was probably harder than what they had in Egypt. The key to their survival, the key to their overcoming was that they had to trust Him. If they trusted Him, He would have given them every bit of strength, every bit of enabling that they would have needed to beat the challenges. They refused because they were always looking under the sun.

We should know better. That is the way Solomon begins this book. He wants us to know that, in a sense, God stacked things against us. It is not that they are so hard to overcome. They are difficult to overcome, but they must be overcome by faith in which He is assisting us and we are trusting Him. We are submitting to Him regardless of what the sacrifice is that we have to make in order to submit to Him. In a sense, brethren, He wants to prove Himself to us. He wants to prove that He is trustworthy, that He can be relied upon, and that way the right kind of character will be built. And in the end, we are going to see that God did it. All we did was say, "Yes, Lord." We submitted.

Let us go on a little further. You can begin to see why those in the world who cannot see over the sun, think statements like this atheist did. He is an intelligent man—there is no doubt about it—but he is thinking carnally so he comes up with this, "Well, there is no

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purpose to life. That is all there is to it."

I want to go on to verses 14 and 15. These verses are important to our state of mind.

Ecclesiastes 1:14-15 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered.

We must labor through life as a Christian overcoming the difficulties that our preparation for the Kingdom of God imposes. Life is tough and it is tiring, as exercise normally is, but it is a gift of God and we will, by choosing to use our faith, be delivered and given complete salvation. Knowing this helps us understand why Solomon wrote what he did in verse 15. This too is a statement made to give direction to our lives.

"What is crooked cannot be made straight and what is lacking cannot be numbered." Again, remember, this is instruction for us. He is not speaking physically. He is not speaking of straightening out a steel bar that is bent. He is talking about life being lived in the vanity-prone world under the sun. In other words, he is saying that the world is full of problems created by human nature under Satan's influence and we are not going to be able to fix them.

Very sincere people say all we have to do is keep the commandments. That is a tall order; they cannot even keep the commandments. They say that because, if you keep the commandments, everything is going to be straightened out. God is saying, "No, it's going to take more than keeping the commandments". Things are not going to be straightened out until Jesus Christ returns and the whole rule of God begins to take over the whole world, replacing Satan the Devil, and then the whole system is going to be changed by God through His children.

Until then, brethren, all of this trouble that we see in the world that is being created by all of the human nature that is in the people who are ruling the nations, whether it is in the banks, corporations, or anywhere else, they are all doing things by human nature. It cannot be straightened out. Christians cannot change this world.

What is the purpose of him saying that? That fits into this book. It involves a choice and that is: do not think that Christianity will change things. It would not. You, individually, turn your attention to your responsibilities to God and you work out the problems in your life. Make that choice and leave the world behind.

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Do not go into politics. That is what he is saying. One candidate is ultimately going to be no better than another candidate. The whole thing has to be changed. Turn your attention to what works; that is your life under Christ. Of course, you can help your brethren of the church because they are of the same spirit, they are of the same mind, and they are headed in the same direction. But those in the world cannot be changed. You would not be here unless God, by a miracle, had changed your outlook so that you can look *over* the sun. Until that happens, the world cannot be straightened. It is going to remain as it is and it is going to get worse. Right now, let us make the right choices.

We are beginning to see the theme of Ecclesiastes very clearly.