

LESSON 2

All Is Vanity under the Sun

Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Key Verse

“All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

Overview

Solomon began the book on an exasperated note. Wherever he looked, life seemed to be a series of circles. He saw a lot of effort and exertion, but no meaningful progress. Therefore, he concluded that life is meaningless or puzzling. It is this puzzle that he set out to solve in Ecclesiastes.

Topic

Progress in life

Theme

Without God, life goes around in circles.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will answer three questions about where he or she is headed in life and seize the opportunity to live beyond the circles of life.

Outline

- I. Title (Eccles. 1:1)
- II. Thesis (Eccles. 1:2, 3)
 - A. Puzzle of life (v. 2)
 - B. Profit of life (v. 3)
- III. Trial (Eccles. 1:4–11)
 - A. Evidence in nature (vv. 4–8)
 - B. Evidence in history (vv. 9–11)

Getting Started

Running in Circles

Ask several volunteers to form a circle. Hand one of them a ball, and instruct those in the circle to pass the ball around until you give the signal to stop. Ask the others in the class to watch the activity carefully. Let the circle continue until many students look bored. Stop the ball, thank the volunteers, and ask them to take their seats.

Materials

- Transparencies 1 and 5
- Whiteboard and markers
- Ball
- One rubber band per learner
- Lesson 2 case study from resource CD
- Ecclesiastes 1:8 verse card from resource CD

Ask: For those in the circle, how did you like the activity? How long would you have wanted to continue this activity? What might have made the activity more satisfying? **Ask:** For the onlookers, did you notice anything significant in this activity? Why?

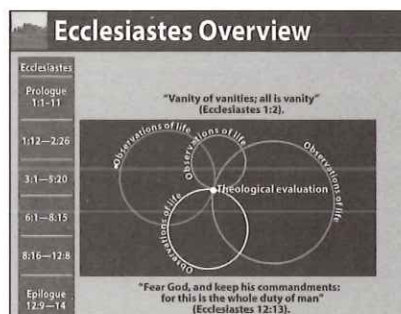
When students mention a lack of purpose and significance, confirm that they have just discovered the same thing Solomon discovered.

This Is Worthless!

Divide the class up into groups of three or four students. Ask each group to come up with as many seemingly worthless tasks as they can. A seemingly worthless task is one that we are doomed to have to repeat. Washing the car or vacuuming the carpet are two examples of tasks we repeat over and over again.

After giving the groups two minutes to work, have them share their lists. **Discuss:** Which repetitive, mundane tasks frustrate you the most? What happens to our outlook on life when we focus on the mundane, repetitive tasks that we do? (Questions 1, 2)

Transparency: Display transparency 2 to review as you pinpoint this week's study—the prologue.



Searching the Scriptures

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11 is the prologue to Solomon's discussion of human significance. Solomon looked at life but saw only that nature and history go around and around in circles. It looked as though there is no real progress in the world. If his observation was accurate, life does not make sense. In Solomon's words, "All is vanity." That raises the question that Solomon endeavored to answer in the rest of the book: "What profit can a person have for all of his effort in life?"

I. Title (Eccles. 1:1)

Ecclesiastes, like Proverbs and many of the prophetic books, begins with a title. This introductory statement is important for several reasons. The writer is called the Preacher, the meaning of which is unclear. It may well mean one who gathers people (1 Kings 8:1) or who collects proverbs (cf. Eccles. 12:9, 10). It could also refer to an arguer (Neh. 5:7).

It is clear that the term "Preacher" refers to Solomon, although the book doesn't identify him by name. Solomon was the unparalleled wise man in Israel's history (cf. 1 Kings 4:29–34). In the book of Proverbs, Solomon collected a large group of maxims of practical wisdom. The proverbs describe how life typically works out in God's ordered world. Ecclesiastes is noticeably different from Proverbs because it discusses why life does not always seem to make sense. Solomon did not confine his writing to only one aspect of wisdom. He searched to understand life in all of its various dimensions.

II. Thesis (Eccles. 1:2, 3)

Solomon began by giving his initial verdict on life. Right from the start, he identified the problem that he was going to examine.

A. Puzzle of life (v. 2)

Solomon uttered his indictment against life, “vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (v. 2). This statement also closes the major section of the book in 12:8. These two verses bookend his examination of life before his rebuttal in 12:9–14.

OBJECT LESSON: Have the learners put their hands a few inches in front of their mouths and take a deep breath. On your signal have them release the air from their lungs onto their hands. Tell the learners that they just illustrated what the word “vanity” means.

The word “vanity,” which Solomon used five times in these verses, literally means *breath*. Just as a breath is brief, so life is empty, fleeting, and therefore puzzling. Despite all its promise, life is a meaningless disappointment.

Solomon’s observation about the vanity of life may seem totally pessimistic, but Solomon was not a pessimist. He simply started his book from the point of view of those who live without God. As they search for fulfillment and meaning in life apart from God, they cannot make any sense of it. They are keenly aware that life is brief, but they are incapable of finding anything solid and lasting to provide meaning to their existence.

DISCUSS: What may have prompted Solomon’s examination of life in this way? (Question 3)

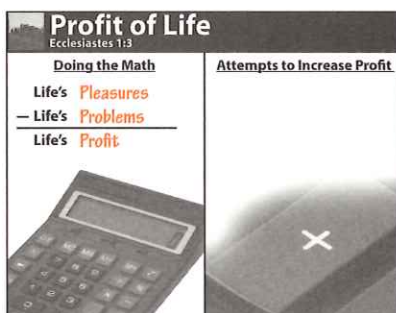
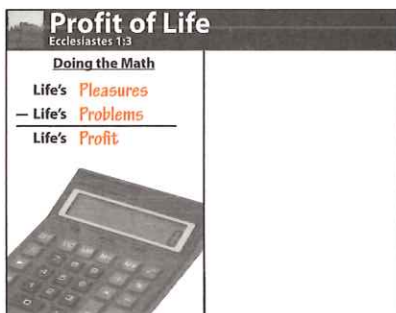
Solomon himself may have gone through this struggle during a period in his life before coming back to his spiritual bearings. If so, this book traces his journey from looking for fulfillment apart from God to finding fulfillment in relationship with God. At the very least, he started his discussion from a point that was relevant for secular humans.

This organization of Ecclesiastes suggests that the book was not written to edify the believer so much as to evangelize the unbeliever. The person who has no place for God can relate most closely to Solomon’s message. Solomon spoke the language of the person who tries to live without God. Throughout the book unbelievers can see themselves in the mirror that Solomon holds up to them. They can identify with the questions, pain, and frustration Ecclesiastes unravels. In doing that, they may become open to the solution that Solomon offers at the end of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes uses the term “vanity” at least 37 times. Solomon looked at life, considered its value and concluded that all is “vanity.” He found that human achievements are short-lived, life is puzzling, and things do not work out as planned. Being good or wise is not always an advantage. Life just has too many variables to allow it to be predictable. Apart from God, it does not make sense, and it cannot satisfy.

“Vanity of vanities” is a superlative in Hebrew, meaning the most vain thing of all.

Example: problems—disease, disasters, loss, struggle with sin; pleasures—good friends, good food, scenic nature, salvation, Scripture.



TESTIMONY: Have two volunteers share a testimony about the emptiness they felt before coming to know Christ. **DISCUSS:** Can a believer feel emptiness in life? If so, what might cause him or her to feel that way? (Questions 4, 5)

B. Profit of life (1:3)

PROFIT STUDY: Divide the learners into groups of three or four learners and give each group a sheet of paper. Assign each group one of the following antonym pairs: problems and pleasures; sorrows and joys; labor and compensation. Instruct groups to list as many aspects of life as they can think of for each category in their assigned pairs.

The major question asked by Ecclesiastes is found in verse 3: “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” The term “profit” was likely a commercial expression for the net earnings after the expenses have been paid. Solomon wanted to determine if anything would be left over after subtracting life’s pains and problems from its pleasures. Only if something remained could he say that life has profit.

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 5 with the right half covered. Fill in the math equation with the words “pleasures, problems, and profit.” **DISCUSS:** Why do people want to know if life is meaningful? (Question 6)

One of Solomon’s key considerations was that life includes labor. When Adam and Eve fell into sin (Gen. 3), God insisted that humans toil by the sweat of their brows. Solomon faced the issue squarely: life is laced with pain, work is often toil, humans often have an anguished existence. Since these conditions exist, do any compensations make all the labor worthwhile?

PROFIT STUDY: Ask groups to tally the number of items listed in each category. **ASK:** Do the positives outweigh the negatives?

In effect, Solomon said, “Let us assume that all there is to life is what we have here on earth. Can we then find profit in our labor?”

PROFIT STUDY: Have groups edit their lists to reflect only items found “under the sun.” They should cross off any items that refer to the spiritual aspect of life. **ASK:** Now do the positives outweigh the negatives? **TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 5. **ASK:** How do some people try to achieve fulfillment in their lives “under the sun”? (Question

7) (Record the learners' answers on the transparency.)

Solomon started right where people are asking their questions. In order to reach them, he took their assumptions and reasoned from them to their logical conclusion. That process led down a dead-end street to despair and futility. Ecclesiastes makes us cry for help when we see our hopelessness. At this point, Solomon stepped in with the answer: "Fear God, and keep his commandments" (12:13).

Ecclesiastes dares to ask the hard questions that plague thinking people of all times. We often try to ignore our fears or to drown our heartache by frenzied work and mindless amusements. However, the nagging question still remains: Is all this effort I put into life going to make my life truly meaningful?

Most people assume that if they just had something different or something more, life would be profitable. Solomon showed how wrong that thinking is. He knew from experience that the world provides no profit of fulfillment when all the pain and toil of life are deducted. The person who lives without God can experience only the bitter taste of vanity—emptiness, futility, a puzzle.

III. Trial (Eccles. 1:4–11)

Solomon formed his thesis by examining life around him. He probed life as a prosecutor presses a legal case. He conducted a trial to determine whether human labor is profitable or futile. He found that in nature and in human life everything seems to go around in circles. There is no real progress or profit—just the unchanging boredom of meaningless existence. When life is viewed "under the sun," that sad picture emerges.

A. Evidence in nature (1:4–8)

As Solomon studied nature, he saw the same picture everywhere: everything was changing, yet everything remained the same. Under the sun there is only endless repetition.

Just as waves repeatedly beat upon a seashore, so one generation of people dies and another takes its place, but the earth remains the same (v. 4). God made us out of the dust of the ground and gave us responsibility for ruling over the earth. However, we are weak and transitory; we live only a few years against the background of the seemingly unchanging earth.

The general statement in verse 4 is paralleled by three specific illustrations from nature in verses 5–7. Just as human generations form an unchanging cycle, so the physical world is comprised of continuously repeating actions.

READ: Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 1:5–7. **ASK:** Have you ever pondered the cycles of nature? What settings cause you to think of nature cycles? (Questions 8, 9)

The rising and setting of the sun each morning is an ever-present reminder of the cyclical course of nature (v. 5). This daily sequence points out the brevity

Solomon had not given up on life; he wanted to challenge his readers to abandon their hopeless effort to find life apart from God. Actually, Solomon was very optimistic about life.

of life, for once a person's life has run its course, it is finished. It cannot start over again as the sun does day after day.

The second illustration is the wind (v. 6). It moves toward the south and back to the north. Following the great air currents, the wind continually whirls about. Although the precise direction of the wind is not predictable (John 3:8), the wind is always changing. It is a product of perpetual motion, always affecting human life, but incomprehensible and uncontrollable.

In the third picture (Eccles. 1:7), Solomon described the water cycle. Water flows into rivers that eventually empty into the sea. But the seas never become full because water is always evaporating into the atmosphere. The water vapor in the atmosphere condenses into water droplets, which fall as rain and other forms of precipitation. Then the whole cycle repeats itself. Life is much different, for once someone dies, he is not reincarnated. The water cycle continues, but human life is brief, and death is final.

After looking at the sun, the wind, and the water cycle, as well as many more events of life, Solomon concluded, "All things are full of labour" (v. 8). Consequently, what he saw in nature did not bring him satisfaction. Also, what he heard from others did not produce fulfillment. Looking at life without taking God into account produces only frustration and heartache.

B. Evidence in history (1:9–11)

Nature is not the only mirror that reveals the meaninglessness of human life. In verses 9–11 Solomon looked at evidence from history and came to the same painful conclusion. Despite people's best efforts, their actions are not really new. Also, future generations remember little about them.

Solomon did not claim that history repeats itself, but rather that there is no significant progress in history (v. 9). Without God in the picture, life is like spinning wheels in a rut. A lot of effort may take place, but nothing of significance happens.

Solomon took the point of view of the secular person. Eventually he would demonstrate that this way of thinking is totally wrong. However, his strategy was to start where most people are in their thinking and to show them the frustration of living without God in the picture. From that standpoint, generations of people repeat the folly of their ancestors. Each person has to learn individually that life cannot have fulfillment without God.

READ: Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 1:9 and 10. **ASK:** If Solomon could be transported into a modern society, do you think he would conclude that there is "nothing new under the sun?" What about all the advancements that have been made in technology? (Question 10)

Solomon asked if anything in life is genuinely new (v. 10). We may think immediately of recent advances in science and technology and say they are new. Man is definitely making advances, but they are in the same realms in which previous generations made advances. For example, going to the moon

is advancement in the realm of exploration, but exploring is not new. Adam began exploring immediately after he was created when he took his first stroll through the Garden of Eden. Research in the fields of medicine and science are clearly more advanced today than they were even fifty years ago. But studying science and medicine are nearly as old as Adam himself.

Furthermore, though the modern period has seen many advances, much knowledge and many skills have been forgotten. For example, no one has yet figured out how the pyramids in Egypt were built. The net gain may be far less than we might suppose. In fact, in many cases it is likely that researchers are rediscovering previously known facts.

Just as the physical world has unchanging rounds of activity, so human knowledge moves in cycles of discovery and forgetting. People today must remember that they are part of a whole stream of human history. They are not necessarily smarter and better than all of their ancestors.

ASK: How does each new generation of teenagers often see themselves in relation to their parents and past generations? What do they eventually learn about life as they grow into adulthood (see verse 10)? (Questions 11, 12)

Solomon took his point a step further in verse 11. Just as people forget what happened before them, so they will be forgotten by future generations. A person may toil to find something new, to accomplish something significant, only to discover that someone had been there long before. All his exertion to break new ground was futile. However, if it is forgotten by future generations, then for all practical purposes their efforts were wasted.

To those men and women who aspire to a great reputation that people will long remember, Solomon gave a sobering rebuke. Even prominent people are virtually forgotten, recalled only as footnotes in later histories. A life devoted to personal achievement cannot bring lasting fulfillment. When God is left out, no amount of human effort can provide fulfillment and stability.

This introduction to Ecclesiastes paints a dismal picture for those who have no room for God in their lives. Solomon was painfully honest in showing the waste of a life without the Lord. The next ten chapters of Ecclesiastes will continue to illustrate this frustration. However, for those who listen to the full message of the wise man, they will learn in the end that there is hope.

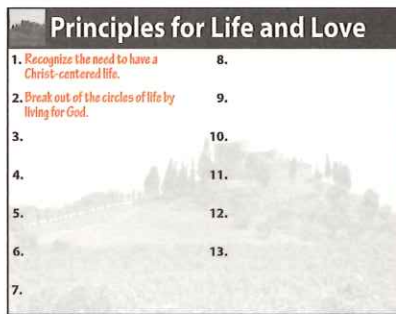
The Hebrew text of verse 11 refers to former people and future people, not to things.

Making it Personal

Where Am I Headed?

Looking at nature and history may show us pictures that we would rather not see. Modern life often becomes so fast and so busy that we do not take time to think seriously about where we are heading. Ecclesiastes challenges us to stop and take stock of what we are doing in life. Ask your learners to

Use the case study for lesson 2 as desired.



ponder the following questions. (Questions 13–15)

- How are you spending your time?
- What are you living for?
- Is your lifestyle really fulfilling to you?

Break the Circle

Distribute a rubber band to each of your learners. Instruct them to break the rubber band as a symbol of their opportunity to live with purpose and meaning as God's children. They don't have to be caught up in the circles of life as if they have no purpose or destination. Encourage the learners to put their broken rubber bands at the book of Ecclesiastes in their Bibles. The rubber bands will serve as a bookmark reminder that having God in their lives makes life more than meaningless circles.

Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Break out of the circles of life by living for God.

Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 1:8 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.