

**“I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.”
—Ecclesiastes 1:14**

Cogito ergo sum. “I think, therefore I am.”

So stated the 17th-century French philosopher, René Descartes (1596–1650). According to legend, Descartes crafted the motto after spending a day in an oven contemplating the basis for certainty in knowledge. He had already concluded that everything was to be doubted, including all the axioms held by philosophers before him. But some kind of starting point—some kind of certainty—was still needed if there was to be any success in the search for truth. Descartes believed he found it that day in the oven . . . *in himself*. He reasoned that although everything was to be doubted, one thing was incontestable—the “I” who was doing the doubting. “Because I am conscious of my doubt, I can be certain of my existence. Hence, *I think* (or better, *I doubt*) *therefore I am*.” From that “certain” consciousness of self, Descartes believed he could reason outward and make sense of the world around him.

Descartes’s motto became the fuel for the Enlightenment. The act of knowing became increasingly grounded in autonomous self-consciousness, and the consequences in the western world have been devastating. The 20th-century Anglican archbishop William Temple described the moment when Descartes crawled out of that oven as “the most disastrous day in European history” (Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 52).

As famous as Descartes is for his motto, he certainly was not the first to advocate reasoning from the starting point of one’s self. Although unable to explain this motto in philosophical terms, many practice its message daily, assuming that they are neutral investigators able to question and arrive at truth wholly on their own, even apart from God. In fact, Solomon himself experimented with this philosophy some 2500 years earlier. Struck by the fleetingness of life (“All is a vapor!” – Eccl 1:2), Solomon sought to find a solution to the dilemma of man’s transience by employing his vast intellectual resources as *the starting point*.

Solomon’s attempt to find significance in the midst of life’s transience is the focus of the first main section of Ecclesiastes. Beginning in 1:12 and running through 2:23, Solomon narrates an autobiography. Committed to finding a solution to the problem of life’s brevity, Solomon recounts how he experimented with various approaches—including intellectual inquiry, the all-out pursuit of pleasure, and the exercise of creativity and hard work. He learns that all these things fail miserably to account for life’s brevity, since they all were employed with Solomon serving as the starting point to his own endeavor. The proper solution to life’s brevity eventually does come to Solomon (see 2:24–26), but only once he abandons himself as the starting point and orients his life wholly under God (see 12:13–14).

In his search for significance, Solomon naturally turns first to his intellect. As one exceptionally endowed with intellectual resources, Solomon attempts to apply all that he has received and learned in the attempt to *reason out* a solution to life’s fleetingness. As Sinclair Ferguson states, “He really thought that the answer to his deep-seated unrest might be found in education: surely the wisdom of the ages and the wonders of science hold the key to life” (*The Pundit’s Folly*, 6–7). In a set of two parallel paragraphs (1:12–15 and 1:16–18), Solomon describes the failure of this experiment. In many ways, it serves as *a lament over wisdom* wrongly applied.

I. The Pundit’s Credentials (1:12 // 1:16)

- **Ecclesiastes 1:12** – “I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.”
- **Ecclesiastes 1:16** – “I said to myself, ‘Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.’”

As king (1:12), Solomon had opportunity and authority to spend enormous sums on experiments, to send delegates to distant lands to interview sources, to gather extensive collections of manuscripts, to hire interpreters and scribes to instruct him in the traditions of past and present cultures, and to host intellectuals and authorities from around the known world. But more than that, Solomon received extraordinary wisdom as a gift directly from God (1:16). These credentials are particularly evident in the narrative of Solomon's life given in the first ten chapters of 1 Kings:

- 1 Kings 3:12
- 1 Kings 4:29–34
- 1 Kings 10:1–29

The Structure of Ecclesiastes 1:12–18

After the Prologue of 1:2–11, the first main section in Ecclesiastes is made up of two short paragraphs of parallel contents.

- 1) *Credentials* – 1:12 // 1:16
- 2) *Methodology* – 1:13a // 1:17a
- 3) *Observations* – 1:13b–14 // 1:17b
- 4) *Verdict* – 1:15 // 1:18

These parallel paragraphs provide the justification for Solomon's assertion in 1:2, "All is a vapor!"

Walter Kaiser summarizes it well: "If any man could unlock the mysteries in this topic, it would be someone such as this famed wise man from Jerusalem to whom God had given such a wonderful gift of wisdom. . . . The king not only had the gift of wisdom, but he also had a wide and extensive view of all that is done under heaven, especially in light of his having access to the international trade routes and his concourse with the peoples that came from distant lands as well" (*Coping with Change*, 75–76). Indeed, if anyone is qualified to assess the success or failure of philosophy (from φίλος [*philos*, "loving"] + σοφία [*sophia*, "wisdom"]) in resolving the dilemma of life's transience, it is Solomon.

II. The Pundit's Methodology (1:13a // 1:17a)

- **Ecclesiastes 1:13a** – "And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven."
- **Ecclesiastes 1:17a** – "And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly."

Having established his *credentials*, Solomon next describes his *methodology*—that is, the nature, source, and scope of his investigation. He states in both sentences that he "**set his mind**" to the task. The words can be literally translated as "**I devoted my heart**." In the Hebrew language, the "heart" is not synonymous with emotions; Solomon is not describing an intuitive, emotional adventure. Rather, the "**heart**" in biblical Hebrew refers to the seat of rationality and judgment, the core of one's personality, the center of personal consciousness. In other words, Solomon's approach is one that is *intensely intellectual*.

To describe the nature of his inquiry, Solomon uses three verbs of cognition: (1) "**to seek**" (v. 13), which means "to seek the roots of a matter"; (2) "**to explore**" (v. 13), which means "to investigate a subject on all sides"; and (3) "**to know**" (v. 17), which means "to know by experience." Solomon explains that he accomplished this experiment "**by wisdom**" (v. 13), indicating that his efforts were not rudely administered, but that he followed all the rules of careful inquiry. Solomon also explains the scope of his inquiry—stating that it was directed to (1) "**all that is done under heaven**" (v. 13), indicating his exhaustive focus on this world; and (2) "**wisdom**" and "**madness and folly**" (v. 17), indicating that he approached the experiment from all angles and points of view, to see whether some advantage might be present in one and not the other.

Ferguson summarizes Solomon's ambition well: "His assumption was this: ignorance is our greatest enemy; if only we can increase knowledge and understanding we will begin to solve more of the problems that curse our lives and our world and make so much of it seem meaningless" (*Pundit's Folly*, 7).

In fact, when all of Solomon's words in 1:12–18 are carefully observed, **two things stand** about his state of mind at the time of his experiment: (1) what is emphasized through *repetition*; and (2) what is emphasized through *absence*. First, it is important to note all the references to *himself*. Dominant throughout the section are first-person singular pronouns ("I," "me," "myself"). This—combined with all the words related to

reasoning and cognition—testifies that Solomon’s starting point at this time in his life was *his own self-consciousness—his own autonomous reasoning*. What is autonomous reasoning? One commentator helpfully defines it as follows: “This is the belief that the individual can and should proceed toward truth by means of his own powers of perception and reason, and that he can in this way discover truths previously unknown” (M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 81–82). This explains so much of Solomon’s sorrowful moments in Ecclesiastes.

Second, an emphasis is observed when looking at what is strangely *absent* from his testimony in 1:12–18. As Solomon applied his intellectual resources to try to find significance in response to life’s brevity, he set aside what he previously acknowledged as utterly indispensable for every intellectual pursuit: *the fear of the LORD*.

- **Proverbs 1:7a** – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”
- **Proverbs 9:10a** – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”

In other words, what Solomon earlier in life acknowledged as foundational—*the revelation of God and a right attitude toward it*—is missing! This is crucial to observe, for it explains why Solomon reached the tentative, despairing conclusions he did in this section. Without the correct major premise (the fear of God), all of Solomon’s syllogisms are automatically flawed. There is no possibility for arriving at the correct conclusion. Yet in the end, it is this fear of the LORD that Solomon will recover, which in turn leads to his restoration (see 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; and especially 12:13–14).

“Autonomy always assumes some neutral capacity within humankind by means of which truth can be arrived at apart from God.” —Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 276

“The occupational hazard of the wise man is to walk by calculation rather than by faith.”
—John Goldingay, “Salvation History,” 200

III. The Pundit’s Observations (1:13b–14 // 1:17b)

- **Ecclesiastes 1:13b–14** – “It is a grievous task *which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.”
- **Ecclesiastes 1:17b** – “I realized that this also is striving after wind.”

As Solomon recounts this intellectual experiment, he now describes the observations he encountered as he sought to apply knowledge and wisdom to the problem *autonomously*, apart from the fear of the LORD. It is noteworthy that Solomon does acknowledge—for the first time in Ecclesiastes—the reality of God, specifically, God’s *sovereignty* over mankind. But what Solomon acknowledges is a bitter truth. He observes that **God is indeed sovereign, but He is sovereign over a world that He has judged**. Apart from fearful faith, this is a bitter pill to swallow.

- **Genesis 3:17–19**
- **Romans 8:20** – “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it.”

Without a healthy attitude of fearful reverence, Solomon looks on man’s duty in this life of transience as “**grievous**” (v. 13). He speaks of this task in negative terms—it is a burdensome, unhappy, difficult one—“a sore travail.” As subject to the consequences of sin both universally and individually, man’s life is naturally *hard* and full of *enigmas*. He no longer lives in the Garden of Eden. He no longer walks with God in the cool of the day. Thus, it is impossible to find answers to difficult questions and solutions to difficult problems. That is a consequence of man’s sinfulness.

- **Ecclesiastes 3:10–11** – “I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.”

This life remains grievous and full of despair, of course, *without the proper fear*. Focused only on life “under the sun,” and examining it only with “self” as the starting point, one perceives despair and pain—“**vanity**” and “**striving after the wind**.” As William Barrick states, “Deep within each human being God implants the urge to seek truth. As sinful human beings, however, the desired result is fraught with frustration and failure. Without God the quest for truth and for eternity is fruitless” (*Ecclesiastes*, 44).

IV. The Pundit's Verdict (1:15 // 1:18)

- **Ecclesiastes 1:15** – “What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.”
- **Ecclesiastes 1:18** – “Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.”

Solomon ends each paragraph with a proverb—a convenient way to conclude for the one who crafted about 3000 of them (1 Kings 4:32)! These parallel proverbs provide a memorable summation of the conclusions Solomon formed during his experiment with autonomous reasoning.

In the first proverb (1:15), Solomon refers to that which is “crooked” but cannot be “straightened. He is not speaking of moral crookedness, for he will explain later that it is actually God who is the One who has done the “bending” (7:13). Rather, that which is “**crooked**” refers to the “grievous task” (v. 13) which God has ordained for fallen man in a fallen world. It refers to the admittedly difficult circumstances in which we live—particularly as we seek to deal with the reality of life’s brevity. Solomon also refers to that which is “**lacking**”—an affirmation that we lack certain information here “under the sun,” and since it is not here, it cannot be used to solve fundamental problems. Thus, as one Bible translation puts it, “You can’t straighten out what is crooked; you can’t count things that aren’t there” (TEV). The sooner we submit to this reality, the sooner we will be ready to live rightly.

In the second proverb (1:18), Solomon refers to the abundance of “**wisdom**” and “**knowledge**” as the causes of grief and pain. Once again, however, this is wisdom and knowledge exercised in a vacuum rather than in the context of a vibrant fearful faith in Yahweh. To summarize these proverbs in other words, ***you cannot erase the curse; you cannot apply solutions God hasn’t provided. Avoid Him, and your best intellectual efforts compound the problem.*** The conclusion seems hopeless, but an inspired solution still lies ahead!

Hear the Preacher!

1. **Forsake:** Renounce all efforts to find significance by your own intellect.
2. **Submit:** Humble yourself before your sovereign God and accept that He owes you nothing.
3. **Fear:** Direct reverential faith toward the One who alone gives significance to your life.
4. **Depend:** Live by the word He has provided—the revelation from *above* the sun that makes sense of life *below* it.

For Discussion

1. Define “autonomous reasoning.”
2. Give some examples of times when this kind of reasoning is tempting in your own life, particularly in response to the hard circumstances of life in a world under the curse (dealing with aging, illness, death).
3. Solomon will list various foolish approaches to dealing with the reality of life’s fleetingness in addition to autonomous reasoning (including the pursuit of pleasure, the accumulation of wealth, and the retreat into accomplishments). What foolish approach has been most tempting to you throughout your life?
4. What is the ultimate solution to the problems described in 1:12–18 (hint: read 12:13–14).

For Further Study

1. Provide a robust definition of “the fear of the LORD.”
2. Why do we find it so easy, especially when faced with life’s most challenging circumstances, to retreat into prideful, self-reliant ways of thinking? Why do we cling to this kind of thinking so dearly?
3. Review the four steps under the section, “Hear the Preacher” and apply it to an area in your life.
4. What are the things that you try (in vain) to keep *straightening* that God has bent?

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: October 11, 7pm – “All That Is in the World” (Ecclesiastes 2:1–17)