

Men *of the* **Word**

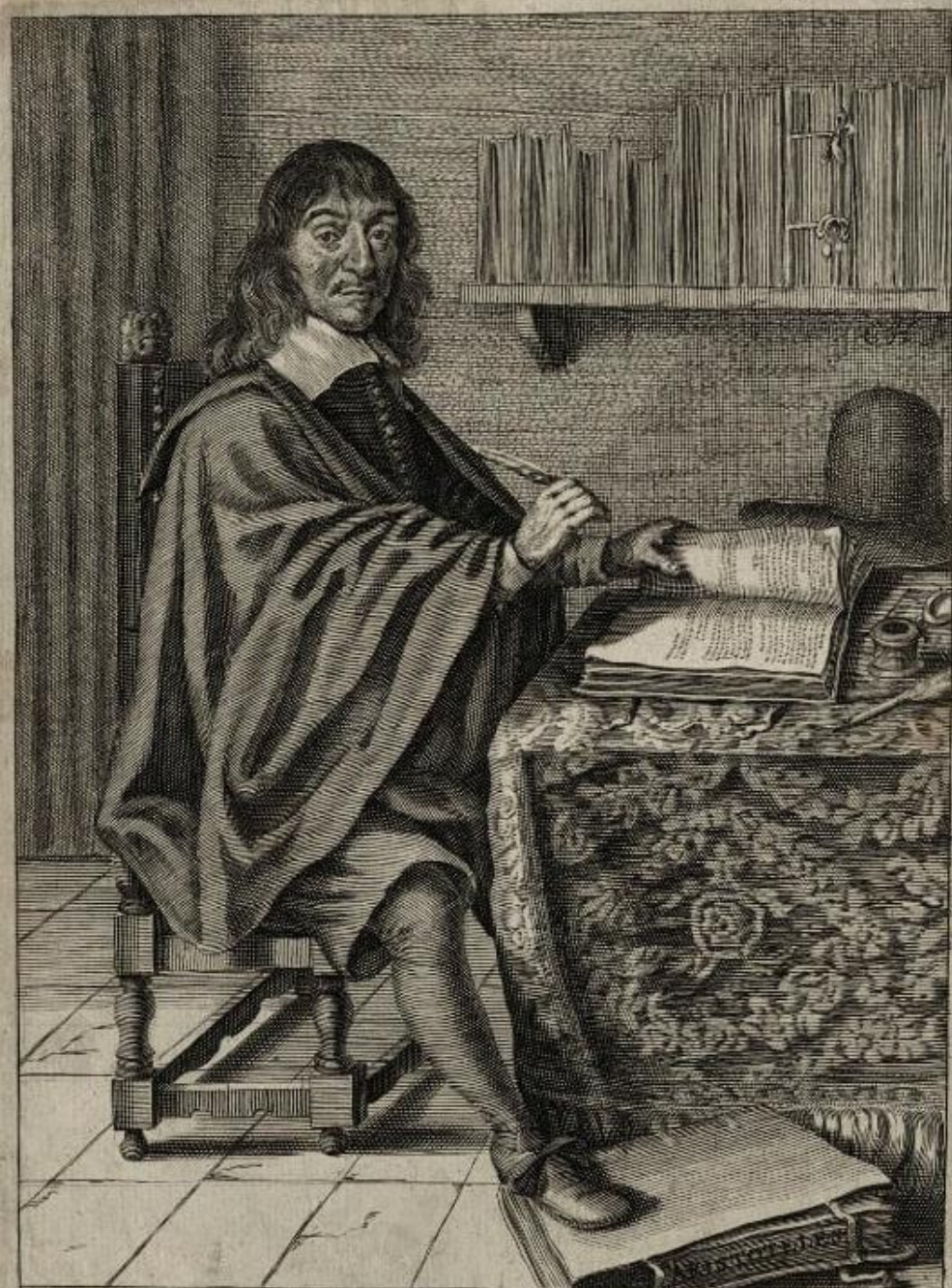
Searching for Significance

A Study in
Ecclesiastes

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

Searching for Significance

Ecclesiastes 1:12–18



Cogito ergo sum.

“I think, therefore I am.”

—René Descartes (1596–1650)

RENATUS DESCARTES, NOBIL. GALL. PERRONI DOM. SUMMUS MATHEM. ET PHILOS.
*Talis erat vultu NATURÆ FILIUS: unus Assignansq; suis quavis miracula causis,
Qui Menti in Matris viscera pandit iter. Miraculum reliquum solus in orbe fuit.*

REVIEW & INTRODUCTION

1:1 – Title

1:2–11 – Prologue

- **1:2** – The Transience of Human Endeavor Asserted
- **1:3–8** – The Transience of Human Endeavor Illustrated
- **1:9–11** – The Transience of Human Endeavor Defended

Significance must be found somewhere in this brief, transient life.

“[The Preacher] 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” (Sinclair Ferguson, *The Pundit's Folly*, 6–7).

“I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. 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. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

1:13b–14 // 1:17b

1:15 // 1:18

“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.’ And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”

—Ecclesiastes 1:12–18

Men of the Word

I. The Pundit's Credentials

Ecclesiastes
1:12, 16

*"I have magnified
and increased wisdom
more than all..."*



- **1:12** – “I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.”
- **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.’”
- Solomon now begins with first-person singular pronouns (“I,” “me”).
- Solomon hints at the great financial, political, and intellectual resources he brought to the search.
- “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” (Walter Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 76).

- **1 Kings 3:12** – “. . . Behold, I [Yahweh] have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you.”
- **1 Kings 4:29–34** – “Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men . . . and his fame was *known* in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. Men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.”

- **1 Kings 10:23–24** – “So King Solomon became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. All the earth was seeking the presence of Solomon, to hear his wisdom which God had put in his heart.”



“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.”

—Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 75

II. The Pundit's Methodology

Ecclesiastes
1:13a, 17a

*"And I set my mind to
seek and explore . . ."*

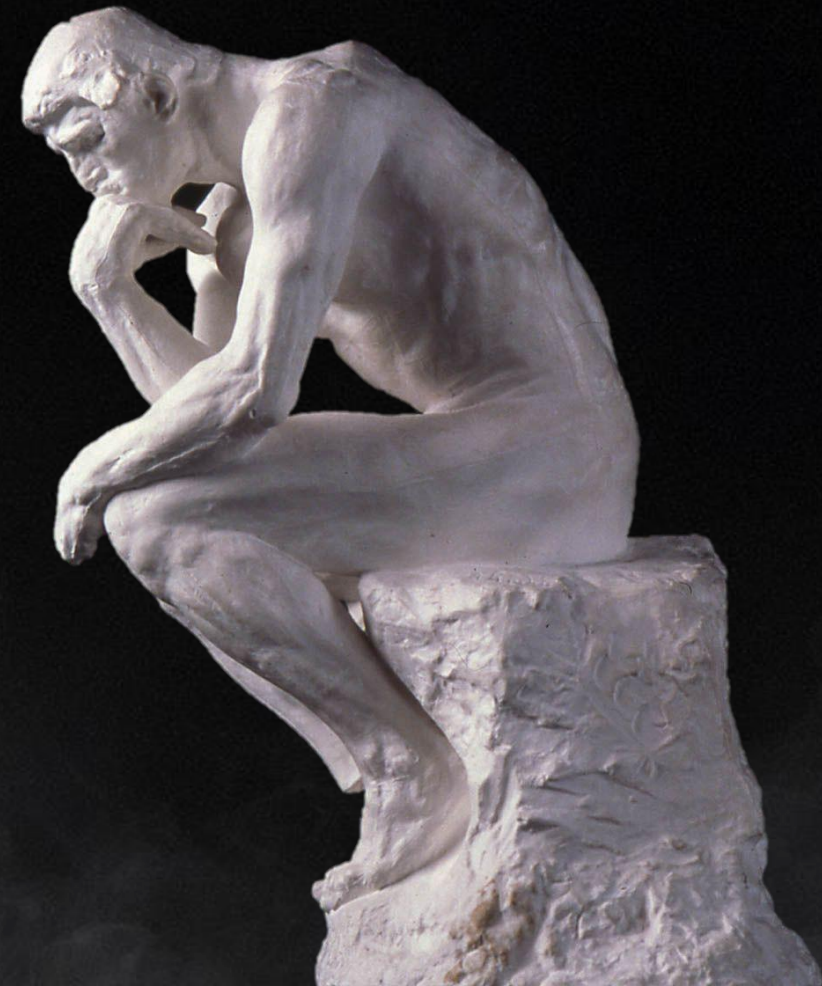


- **1:13a** – “And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.”
- **1:17a** – “And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.”
- These parallel statements express Solomon’s *methodology* (epistemology)—the nature, source, and scope of his investigation.
- **“Set my mind”** – “I applied myself” – *literally*, “I devoted my heart.”
 - The “heart” in biblical Hebrew is not synonymous with *emotions*.
 - The “heart” is the seat of rationality and judgment, the *center of personal consciousness*.

- Solomon uses three verbs to describe the *methodology* of his inquiry:
 - 1) “to seek” (v. 13) – “to seek the roots of a matter.”
 - 2) “to explore” (v. 13) – “to investigate a subject on all sides.”
 - 3) “to know” (v. 17) – “to know *by experience*.”
- Solomon identifies the *instrument* of his inquiry: “by wisdom” (v. 13).
 - A *philosophical* quest—an attempt to find significance by *rational and empirical enquiry*.
- Solomon describes the *scope* of his inquiry:
 - 1) “all that is done under heaven” (v. 13) – an exhaustive focus on *this* world.
 - 2) “wisdom” and “madness and folly” (v. 17) – from all angles.

“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.”

—Sinclair Ferguson, *Pundit's Folly*, 7



‘I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *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. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.

‘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.’ And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.”

- The fatal flaw: *autonomous thinking*—reasoning from *self* as the *starting point*.
 - “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).
- Shockingly absent from Solomon’s testimony of his intellectual inquiry is the basic ingredient of *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.”

“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

Ecclesiastes

1:13b–14, 17b

*“... all is vanity and
striving after wind.”*



- **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.”
- **1:17b** – “I realized that this also is striving after wind.”
- Solomon describes the experience of all who employ the methodology of autonomous reasoning.
- Solomon does acknowledge—for the first time—the reality of God, specifically, His *sovereignty* over mankind.
- But Solomon acknowledges a little-appreciated reality about God—His sovereignty over the *fallen world*, a sovereignty that subjects it to *the curse* (Gen 3:17–19; Rom 8:20).

- Solomon calls the search for significance “a grievous task” (v. 13).
 - The term “task” occurs only in Ecclesiastes; its basic idea is one of “business” or “occupation.”
 - Solomon speaks of this task in negative terms—it is a *burdensome, unhappy, difficult* one—“a sore travail.”
- **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.”

“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.”

—William Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 44



- Solomon's experience acknowledges the end of the journey for all who pursue wisdom for wisdom's sake.
- **1:13b–14** – "... and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."
- **1:17b** – "I realized that this also is striving after wind."
 - "vanity" (*hebel*) – a mere vapor; fleeting.
 - "striving after the wind" – herding the wind.
- Having interviewed countless sages, read innumerable books, calculated myriads of syllogisms, Solomon is brought to one inimitable conclusion: *it is all an evaporating vapor*.
- Solomon humbly admits failure.

IV. The Pundit's Verdict

Ecclesiastes
1:15, 18

*"What is crooked
cannot be
straightened..."*



- **1:15** – “What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.”
- **1:18** – “Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.”
- “crooked” – not moral crookedness but burdensome circumstance—the “grievous task” (v. 13) that comes to those under the curse.
- “lacking” – certain information is missing “under the sun”; since it is not here, it cannot be used to solve fundamental problems.
- “Much wisdom/knowledge” – understood apart from the fear of the LORD.
- **SUM:** You cannot erase the curse; you cannot apply solutions God hasn’t provided. Avoid Him, and your best intellectual efforts compound the problem.

“The fundamental human problem resides in a lack of harmony between common human aspirations and the very nature of reality itself, [and] the futility of human refusal to accept things the way they are.

There is a human insistence that the impossible can in fact be achieved—that what God has made ‘crooked’ or ‘twisted’ can indeed be made straight by human, mortal effort. . . . Refusing to accept reality can only result in unhappiness and weariness.”

—Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 69–70



“The soul that has wandered from God
will search heaven and earth in vain for rest.”

—Charles Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, 23

Hear the Preacher

*"The words of wise
men are like goads . . ."*



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.

A black and white photograph of an open book with a hand turning a page. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the book's pages and the hand. The title "Men of the Word" is overlaid in white text.

Men *of the* Word

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