

VANITY OF VANITIES

ECCLESIASTES 1



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T . M . M O O R E

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Vanity of Vanities: Ecclesiastes 1
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Ecclesiastes 1: Introduction

Ecclesiastes recounts the journey of King Solomon from wisdom to woe, and back to wisdom again. In Ecclesiastes 1 Solomon provides an introduction and overview of his basic theme: You can't find lasting meaning and happiness in life apart from trusting in the Lord.

Ecclesiastes is a series of counsels, interviews, proverbs, and "memos" to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, soon to become King of Israel. Apparently, Solomon perceived that he was getting off on the wrong foot, and he collected these various teachings, aphorisms, and personal experiences to try to forestall Rehoboam's drift into a life of folly and vanity.

Read Ecclesiastes 1 in your favorite Bible version. Take each of the installments that follow for daily reading and meditation. Then, at the end of the week, work through the questions at the end of this study. You'll see that these questions are suitable for personal or group use, so why not gather some friends to join you in this journey through one of the most important and most relevant books for our time?

We are happy to provide *Scriptorium* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity with the Lord.

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If you find these studies, or any of our other resources, helpful, we hope you will consider making a contribution to help support our work. You can do so by using the donate button at the website or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes 1 a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Is That All There Is?

Pray Psalm 104.1-4.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, You are very great:
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment,
Who stretch out the heavens like a curtain.
He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters,
Who makes the clouds His chariot,
Who walks on the wings of the wind,
Who makes His angels spirits,
His ministers a flame of fire.

Read Ecclesiastes 1.1, 2.

Prepare.

1. How much do you know about Solomon and his reign?
2. Why would Solomon be writing such a dour book?

Meditate.

Since Solomon begins this collection of reminiscences, warnings, and exhortations on such a dour note (“vanity of vanities” – what a page-turner!), we might be tempted to think that this – despair and disappointment – is the ultimate theme of the book. But Solomon is not beginning with his conclusion; instead, he is beginning with the primary lesson he wants to convey to his son, Rehoboam: Life apart from God isn’t worth the trouble.

Two reasons appear in these verses for thinking, with most of Christian tradition, that the writer here is Solomon. First, he claims as much, since only one son of David was king of all Israel in Jerusalem (v. 12). Second, he refers to himself not by name but by a curious title, “Qohelet.” The NKJV translates this word, “Preacher”, but it is really closer to “Leader of the Assembly” since it derives from the Hebrew verb meaning, “to assemble”. Solomon refers to himself as something like the “Worship Leader”. Is Solomon, shamed in his old age, harking back to his glory days, when he led all Israel in assembly before God (cf. 2 Chronicles 5-7, and note how many times Solomon is described as “assembling” the people)?

Solomon had made a mess of things by the end of his life, but, as we shall see, he seems to have recovered his senses in the end, at least enough to gather together these words of warning for his son, whom he saw making the same mistakes he had during his reign as king.

In his old age Solomon, after straying far from God’s purposes, somehow managed to recover his senses and turn again to the Lord (Eccl. 12). He must have recognized the bad example he had set for his son and, by gathering together these words of testimony, exhortation, common sense, and warning, hoped to spare Rehoboam the disappointment and misery which had overcome him.

Ecclesiastes is something like a last testament, directed to Solomon’s son, but with timeless words for anyone considering or trapped in a life apart from God and His truth. The theme of “vanity” will

recur in Ecclesiastes as a way of connecting with those who may be tempted to live any part of their lives with a strictly “this-world” frame of reference. When we read about the vanity of life, we should understand that Solomon is not speaking about life as God intended it, but as men experience it – as he did – while wandering from God and seeking their own way in life (Prov. 14.12). Appropriately, therefore, he begins his meditations at the point that he believes would most likely connect with his son, and with readers from every age: Is there any meaning, any purpose to life?

Bonus note: It is possible that the book of Ecclesiastes (“the words of the Worship Leader” – Heb. **דְּבַרֵי קֹהֵלֶת**) may be the book referred to in 1 Kings 11.41 as the book of the “words of Solomon” (Heb. **דְּבַרֵי שְׁלֹמֹה**.)

Reflect.

1. What does the phrase “vanity of vanities” suggest? Why do we need to know about this?
2. Quickly review 2 Chronicles 5-7. Why would Solomon prefer the title “Worship Leader” (**קֹהֵלֶת** – Qohelet) to refer to himself? What seems to have been ultimately most important to Solomon? What legacy was he trying to leave for his son?
3. What goal would you like to set for our study of Ecclesiastes? Forward today’s lesson to several friends, and invite them to study along with you. You could even plan to meet from time to time, and discuss what you’re learning. This would be an effective way to encourage believers in your Personal Mission Field to keep growing in the Lord.

Solomon is here given the Greek name Ecclesiastes [Heb Qōbelet], for he gathers the assembly [qābāl], that is, the church. But we can call him the Preacher because he speaks to the people and his word is directed not only to one person but to everyone. Jerome (347-420), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1

Lord, I pray for the people in my Personal Mission Field who don’t know you. Give me grace today so that I can...

Pray Psalm 104.1-15.

Take your time as you pray, and marvel at the great sovereignty, goodness, and power of God, especially as these bear on you throughout the day. Pray for those in your Personal Mission Field who don’t know this all-sovereign and loving God.

Sing Psalm 104.1-15.

Psalm 104.1-15 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

Bless God, my soul! How great are You, Lord, with majesty and splendor adorned.
The heav’ns He stretches like a tent, and lays His chambers in the firmament.
He rides the wings of winds on high and makes His messengers flaming fly.
The earth on its foundation stands, established forever by His hands.

The earth and mountains He did flood; they fled at Your rebuke, O sovereign God!
The mountains rose, the valleys sank low; to where You determined they should go.
You set a boundary, hold them in, that they may not cover the earth again.
You make the valleys gush with springs; and to all creatures refreshment bring.

The birds beside the waters dwell and sing in the branches, full and well.
You drench the mountains from above; the earth is sated by Your love.
You cause the grass for beasts to grow, and plants for food to feed us so;
and wine to gladden man's poor soul, and bread and oil to make us whole.

2 Been There, Done That

Pray Psalm 104.10-13.

He sends the springs into the valleys;
They flow among the hills.
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
By them the birds of the heavens have their home;
They sing among the branches.
He waters the hills from His upper chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.

Read Ecclesiastes 1.3-7.

Reflect.

1. What is Solomon contemplating here? Why? What does he seem to be looking for?
2. Summarize his observations.

Meditate.

Where do people turn to discover meaning and purpose for their lives? The same places Solomon was led to explore, once he had turned away from the God of Scripture.

People try to find meaning in their work (v. 3), their experiences (and those of the human race, v. 4), and the patterns and processes of the created world (vv. 5, 6). As he will explain, Solomon had “been there, done that” with all these traditional sources of meaning, and none of them yielded anything other than short-term satisfaction.

Ultimately, all these areas lead to disappointment when it comes to discovering permanent, abiding things. People cannot help but wonder about what their lives are supposed to count for in an impersonal, uncaring world. Rehoboam was surely doing the same; Solomon only hoped to guide his son away from the dead end toward which (by the end of Solomon’s life) he must have already been heading. “I know what you’re thinking,” Solomon seems to have been saying, “and I can assure that what you hope to find in your work, your experience, or your reflections on the world in all its complexity will not be what awaits you there.”

These first 11 verses of Ecclesiastes are a kind of synopsis of Solomon’s experience apart from God. The chapters that follow will elaborate on topics raised here. Like the overture of a musical or opera, Ecclesiastes 1.1-11 presents the themes, moods, and motifs that will recur throughout the book. While it is difficult to impose a consistent outline or logical flow to the chapters of Ecclesiastes, this opening synopsis seems to have served as a touchstone to which Solomon returns again and again in seeking to turn his son from vanity to hope.

A sense of impenetrable mystery pervades verses 3-7. We can recognize priorities and patterns – work, life and death, sun and wind and water – but they appear as mere phenomena; they do not yield explanations as to who we are, why we are here, or how we can make sense out of our lives. If all we have to look to for discovering our reason for being are those things we can see and experience, then we are headed for frustration, disappointment, and, ultimately, meaningless death.

Reflect.

1. Do you think we should spend more time, like Solomon, contemplating creation and trying to understand the times? Explain.
2. Solomon seems to be saying here, “You look around you, and everything just goes on, without any meaning.” Do you agree? Explain.
3. What *should* we expect to discover by contemplating the things Solomon mentions in these verses?

What is the goal of the water’s course which always fills the unquenchable sea? What is this influx of water which never fills the ever-constant sea? Ecclesiastes speaks like this that he may explain the insubstantiality of our frenzied pursuits which result from elements constituting man’s existence. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), Homilies on Ecclesiastes 1

Lord, the world awaiting me today is filled with meaning, beauty, goodness, and glory. Help me to see it, so that I...

Pray Psalm 104.16-30.

Praise God, and meditate with wonder and joy, on His comprehensive, gracious, faithful, and glorious management of the entire creation. Make a point to be alert throughout the day to reminders of His sovereign Presence and care.

Sing Psalm 104.16-30.

Psalm 104.16-30 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

The trees You water with Your grace, the mighty cedars in their place;
in them the birds their dwellings build, and goats inhabit every hill.
You made the moon the times to mark; the sun declines; You made the dark.
By night the beasts pursue their prey, and man to labor goes by day.

How many are Your works, O Lord, which You have created by Your Word!
The earth and sea with creatures teem – they look to You to care and feed.
You give to them, they gather all; You hide Your face, they fail and fall.
You take their breath, they gasp and die; You send Your Spirit, they revive.

3 No Satisfaction

Pray Psalm 104.20-23

You make darkness, and it is night,
In which all the beasts of the forest creep about.
The young lions roar after their prey,
And seek their food from God.
When the sun rises, they gather together
And lie down in their dens.
Man goes out to his work
And to his labor until the evening.

Read Ecclesiastes 1.8-11.

Reflect.

1. Why is there “nothing new under the sun”?
2. What “satisfaction” should we be seeking? Is this what Solomon was seeking?

Meditate.

Solomon insists that nothing new – nothing beyond what he had learned or experienced – was to be gained by reading, observing, studying, or trying to make a name for ourselves. All things are laborious, Solomon advised, when we look at them as ends in themselves or as the highest achievements or experiences that we may know in this life. This way lies no satisfaction in life (v. 8).

Every generation seems bent on trying out everything for itself, believing they can find meaning and purpose on their own terms. But if they won’t remember the advice and experiences of their forebears (v.11), what can they hope to attain or achieve that anyone after *them* might want to remember? Everything is fleeting in a world where people live only for the moment, only for themselves, and only with a view to the material horizon and personal happiness.

Solomon introduces here one of two recurring phrases which we must understand to discern his meaning in Ecclesiastes. “Under the sun” (v. 9) occurs over twenty times in this book, and it always refers to man’s attempt to make his life make sense apart from God. Wherever this phrase occurs, “vanity of vanities” or “striving after wind” is not far away.

God alone is able to make sense of our experience in this world. Only by conducting our lives before Him, with Him, in Him, and unto His glory – “under the heavens” – can people hope to find lasting satisfaction and pleasure in life. “Under the sun”, everything is weariness, frustration, disappointment, and impermanence. This, apparently, was the road Rehoboam had chosen to follow – taking his father’s later years as his example. But now Solomon was hoping to call him back to his senses.

For Rehoboam, however, it was already too late.

Reflect.

1. Can you see our own age reflected in Solomon’s words here? Explain.

2. Why can worldly experiences and success not provide the ultimate satisfaction people seek?

3. What value is there in understanding the experiences of earlier times? Why should Christians especially pay attention to the history of the Christian movement? What can we learn from our forebears in the faith?

*To speak now of the troubles of this life, the person has taken his soul in vain who is constructing the things of the world and building the things of the body. We arise each day to eat and drink; yet no one is filled so that he does not hunger and thirst after a short time. Daily we seek profit, and to greed there is set no limit. Ambrose (333-397), *Death as a Good* 7.28*

Lord, our only ultimate satisfaction is in You – in knowing, loving, and serving You in all we do. Satisfy me with Your Presence and help today, Lord, as I...

Pray Psalm 104.10-23.

God is at work all around you, within you, and through you. Commit your day to Him, and set your mind to see Him at work and praise Him throughout the day.

Sing Psalm 104.16-30.

Psalm 104.16-30 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

The trees You water with Your grace, the mighty cedars in their place;
in them the birds their dwellings build, and goats inhabit every hill.
You made the moon the times to mark; the sun declines; You made the dark.
By night the beasts pursue their prey, and man to labor goes by day.

How many are Your works, O Lord, which You have created by Your Word!
The earth and sea with creatures teem – they look to You to care and feed.
You give to them, they gather all; You hide Your face, they fail and fall.
You take their breath, they gasp and die; You send Your Spirit, they revive.

4 Off to a Good Start

Pray Psalm 104.33, 34.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.
May my meditation be sweet to Him;
I will be glad in the LORD.

Read Ecclesiastes 1.12, 13.

Reflect.

1. With what kind of orientation did Solomon “set” his heart? What does that mean?
2. Why is this a “burdensome task”? Should we find whatever God calls us to do as easy?

Meditate.

Solomon reflects on his beginnings as king. The verb, “was” (v. 12), can be translated, “became.” When Solomon became king, he immediately appealed to God for wisdom (2 Chron. 1.7-12), so that he could govern the people of Israel in a proper, responsible manner.

God granted his request, but apparently Solomon was not granted such wisdom all at once. Believing the promise he received in his dream, he set his heart to acquire wisdom, gave himself to the task of seeking it, and studied, learned, observed, reflected, and listened as much as he could, ever growing in the wisdom God had promised to grant him.

God gave Solomon wisdom as he needed it, and to the extent that he demonstrated, through difficult and diligent effort, his desire sincerely to attain it. Moreover, Solomon insists, this quest for wisdom, though a “difficult task” (Hebrew; NKJV: “burdensome task”) has been appointed to all the children of men. The *beginning* of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Ps. 111.10), as Solomon demonstrated in seeking and submitting to God in order to gain wisdom. But the *acquisition* of wisdom requires a lifetime of living and working in relationship to God by grace through faith.

Here Solomon introduces the second key phrase which is something of a hermeneutical cue for Ecclesiastes. “Under heaven” (or “under the heavens”) refers to life as lived in relationship to God, with a view to His eternal existence, purpose, and will. This phrase occurs only three times in Ecclesiastes, and each time it is clear that Solomon is reflecting on things as they ought to be understood, according to the divine economy and plan.

God calls men to understand the whole of life as He does; and He charges and enables us, by difficult study and obedience, to gain the wisdom He promises to give. For the redeemed of the Lord – those who trust in Him and enter into His life through the Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ – the way to the restoration of all things is along the path of wisdom. Wisdom is simply the Christian worldview, increasingly realized through diligent study and faithful obedience.

Perhaps no one since Solomon (our Lord Jesus excepted) has come as close to a full understanding of the worldview that corresponds with the mind of God; nevertheless, the challenge to pursue that

worldview falls to each of us yet today, who have the mind of Christ, and are therefore without excuse for not failing to embrace this difficult but glorious calling (1 Cor. 2.16).

Reflect.

1. Why is gaining wisdom such a “difficult task”? Shouldn’t it be easy to become wise? Explain.
2. Solomon said he set his heart to this task. How does one set his heart for anything? Mediate on Proverbs 4.23. What is the heart, and why does it matter so much?
3. What would you say are the critical components for a life of seeking wisdom?

The reason for our Lord’s dwelling with men is to give his heart over in wisdom to consider his actions done under the sun. For man is not allowed to consider what lies above heaven just as healthy persons do not require doctors. Evil belongs to the earth...For this reason Ecclesiastes gives his heart over to careful consideration of every activity done under heaven. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), Homilies on Ecclesiastes 2

I know that I need to increase in wisdom, Lord. Help me do so today as I...

Pray Psalm 104.24-35.

Ask God to allow you to see Him at work all around you today, and to prepare your heart to praise and thank Him as you do.

Sing Psalm 104.24-35.

Psalm 104.24-35 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

How many are Your works, O Lord, which You have created by Your Word!
The earth and sea with creatures teem – they look to You to care and feed.
You give to them, they gather all; You hide Your face, they fail and fall.
You take their breath, they gasp and die; You send Your Spirit, they revive.

Lord, let Your glory long endure. Rejoice! His works are ever sure!
He looks on earth, it quails and quakes, as we our songs of praises make.
Lord, let our meditation rise and bring great pleasure in Your eyes.
Consumed shall sinners ever be; O, bless and praise the Lord with me!

5 Vanity and Striving

Pray Psalm 104.24.

O LORD, how manifold are Your works!
In wisdom You have made them all.

Read Ecclesiastes 1.14, 15.

Reflect.

1. Notice that Solomon went from “under heaven” (v. 13) to “under the sun” (v. 14). What does this imply?
2. What is he trying to say in verse 15?

Meditate.

From the beginning of his story in verses 12 and 13, Solomon here jumps to (near) the end. He began well, seeking the wisdom of God, to understand and rule according to the divine economy (“under heaven”, v. 13). His efforts paid off, and Israel became the envy of all the nations (cf. 1 Kgs. 10).

However, as we read in 1 Kings 11, Solomon got off track at some point, and he continued to veer into the path of self-indulgence apart from God, as we shall see in Ecclesiastes 2. Thus, even as successful, loved, honored, wealthy, and wise as he was, when he turned from God to the things of the flesh, nothing had any meaning or permanence for King Solomon. And nothing that he could do or fix (“crooked”, “lacking”) would have made any difference, because to him, nothing appeared to be going wrong.

Under the sun, the satisfaction men seek is always fleeting (vanity) and elusive (wind). Of course there are rewards and a certain amount of happiness, but in the end, all is weariness and leaves men still searching for something more than what this temporal, material age can provide. Or as Paul would say, people, as long as they remain strangers from God, are without hope in the world (Eph. 2.12).

Ecclesiastes is thus a book of contrasts. Solomon wants his son to think very carefully about the path of self-indulgence and self-serving he has embarked upon. He’s been there, done that, and it left him with nothing but longing for something all the pleasures and riches of this world could not provide. And that’s not where God wants us to be anyway.

Men hope to attain a certain measure of wholeness and satisfaction through temporal means and material ends; yet no one will ever be as successful as Solomon was. And still his life “under the sun” was empty.

Here is a warning also for those who confess faith in God: You may be sound in your convictions at this point, but if you do not ground yourself in the Lord and guard your way against the temptations of the world, you may end up groping for meaning and happiness at the end of your days, with no satisfaction to give peace to your soul. You can't have it both ways: it's either "under heaven" or "under the sun".

Reflect.

1. Why do the things people do apart from God – make a living, enter relationships, acquire things, make a name for themselves, and so forth – not provide the deeper satisfaction they seek?
2. To the crooked man, everything he does seems straight; to the one who lacks wisdom, everything he does seems wise. Why is it so hard for unbelieving people to see the folly of their ways?
3. What is Solomon trying to say about life apart from God? About life under God's Word?

An accurate understanding of these verses does not mean that human nature lacks anything unbecoming from God; rather, they censure our power of free choice which in itself is good and a gift bestowed by God to human nature. But as a result of indiscretion, free will inclines towards the opposite way. John Chrysostom (344-407), *Homilies on Ecclesiastes 2*

I want to live under the heavens throughout this day, Lord, so that I will...

Pray Psalm 104.24-30.

What works are before you today? What activities? Appointments? Chores? Commit them all to the Lord, and ask Him to be at work within you, willing and doing according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2.13).

Sing Psalm 104.24-30.

Psalm 104.24-30 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

How many are Your works, O Lord, which You have created by Your Word!
The earth and sea with creatures teem – they look to You to care and feed.
You give to them, they gather all; You hide Your face, they fail and fall.
You take their breath, they gasp and die; You send Your Spirit, they revive.

6 Had It...

Pray Psalm 104.33-35

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.
May my meditation be sweet to Him;
I will be glad in the Lord.
May sinners be consumed from the earth,
And the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!
Praise the LORD!

Read Ecclesiastes 1.16

Reflect.

1. Solomon says he communed with his heart. Why the heart? Why not the mind?
2. He mentions his “heart” twice in this verse. What’s so important about the heart?

Meditate.

Ecclesiastes 1 ends like the last movement of a Beethoven symphony, coda after coda, restating or expanding the theme and motif so that the conclusion is firmly established.

In verse 16, Solomon reflects on the condition at which he had arrived in verse 11: He had known more wisdom and knowledge than any of his forebears. He had realized all his desires and a full measure of the gift of God as a result of much study and diligent labor. But in this verse is a hint of what will become more pronounced in verse 17 and chapter 2 – Solomon reflecting on Solomon and the greatness he had attained.

Still, at this point Solomon’s primary concern is to emphasize that it is not likely his son – or many subsequent readers – would realize as much in the way of wisdom and knowledge – or all their fruits – as he had gained; thus, it behooves us to listen to him and consider his counsel carefully.

The sudden appearance of multiplied instances of first person pronouns (“I”, “my”, “I”, “me”, “My”) is hard to overlook. It’s as if Solomon is admitting, “I had it all, and it began to be all about me.” Ecclesiastes 2 will make this point even more emphatically.

Solomon’s quest had begun all about God and governing God’s people so that they could know God’s blessing. At some point it began to be all about Solomon; and, when it was, it was never enough.

As he anticipated receiving his father’s crown, Rehoboam seems already to have set his heart on a similar course. All his father’s wealth, wisdom, and servants would be his, to do with as he pleased. As Solomon will imply in verse 17, such thinking is madness and folly; better to recognize this as soon as possible and to seek the Lord and His wisdom in all things.

Reflect.

1. In the soul, the heart is the seat of affections – what we desire, hope for, aspire to, and so forth. Meditate on Proverbs 4.23. How would you describe the relationship between the heart and knowing “wisdom and knowledge”?

2. How successful was Solomon in his quest to gain wisdom and knowledge? What danger lies in achieving so much?

3. How can you tell when pride or self-interest is beginning to take over in your soul? What should you do then?

Therefore it is written in Ecclesiastes, “And I added wisdom above all who were before me in Jerusalem; and my heart saw many things; and besides, I knew wisdom and knowledge, parables and understanding. And this also is the choice of the spirit, because in abundance of wisdom is abundance of knowledge.” Clement of Alexandria (150-215), *Stromatias 1.13*

Keep me from mere self-interest, O Lord, and help me in all I do to...

Pray Psalm 104.31-35.

Pray for the lost people in your Personal Mission Field. Pray that they would come to their senses about the vanity of their lives, and that they would begin to seek the Lord. Pray for an opportunity to talk with them about Jesus.

Sing Psalm 104.31-35.

Psalm 104.31-35 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

Lord, let Your glory long endure. Rejoice! His works are ever sure!
He looks on earth, it quails and quakes, as we our songs of praises make.
Lord, let our meditation rise and bring great pleasure in Your eyes.
Consumed shall sinners ever be. O, bless and praise the Lord with me!

7 ...Lost It

Pray Psalm 104.1, 35.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD my God, You are very great...

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Praise the LORD!

Read Ecclesiastes 1.17, 18.

Reflect.

1. To what did Solomon set his heart? What does this mean?

2. What did he conclude from this?

Meditate.

You can't have it both ways. That seems to be Solomon's lesson to Rehoboam from his own experience.

At the height of his wisdom Solomon sought to indulge a little madness and folly. In his case, that took the form of foreign wives and their gods (1 Kgs. 11), as well as, undoubtedly, the political and material advantages such marriages brought with them.

But no one can serve two masters, as our Lord Jesus pointed out (Matt. 6.24). When Solomon began to compromise on living "under the heavens", his life and wellbeing started to unravel. He must have been mad and a fool to think he would be better off "under the sun". The "grief" and "sorrow" that accompany knowledge and wisdom are probably references to increased temptation, especially the temptation to pride. We need to recognize temptation for the madness and folly it presents; and, unlike Solomon – so he appears to be counseling us – we need to hold our ground "under the heavens" and not think to find something better by turning away from the Lord.

So Ecclesiastes 1 ends, a strong introduction to and overview of the themes and main character of *Ecclesiastes*.

Wisdom is good; we're made to have it. But it doesn't come easily. We must seek wisdom from the Lord if we would enter into His plan for restoring the world to its fullest blessing. And we must resist the temptation to serve ourselves or to think that anything in this life can bring as much joy, meaning, and fulfillment as faithfully seeking the Lord and His wisdom.

The opposite of seeking wisdom is to indulge in folly – the way of the fool, and madness – the way of the man who is not thinking straight. The redeemed of the Lord, called to serve Him for restoration and blessing, must conduct their lives before Him, in the light of His truth, seeking His wisdom for every area of their lives, and resisting every siren voice that seeks to draw them onto the rocks of moral or spiritual disaster.

Reflect.

1. How can we know whether we're living "under the sun" or "under the heavens" at any moment?
2. How can believers help one another to live more consistently "under the heavens"?
3. How does Ecclesiastes 1 encourage you to pray for the people in your Personal Mission Field?

*Solomon is the one speaking here, the third king of Israel whom the Lord had chosen after Saul and David. He received the kingship from his father and extended his rule which brought him renown among the Israelites. Solomon no longer subjected peoples through battle; by conducting himself peacefully and with full authority, he did not devote his energy towards anything not belonging to him.... He claimed to know the efforts needed to attain pleasure and accomplished everything which he had enumerated, an experience which taught him that vanity is the common end of men's pursuits. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), *Homilies on Ecclesiastes 2**

You have called me to live under the heavens, O Lord, and today I will do so as I...

Pray Psalm 104.1-35.

Let this psalm lead you to praise God for all His works of providence, by which He sustains the world and everything in it.

Sing Psalm 104.1-35.

Psalm 104.1-35 (*Creation: Exalt the Lord, His Praise Proclaim*)

Bless God, my soul! How great are You, Lord, with majesty and splendor adorned.
The heav'ns He stretches like a tent, and lays His chambers in the firmament.
He rides the wings of winds on high and makes His messengers flaming fly.
The earth on its foundation stands, established forever by His hands.

The earth and mountains He did flood; they fled at Your rebuke, O sovereign God!
The mountains rose, the valleys sank low; to where You determined they should go.
You set a boundary, hold them in, that they may not cover the earth again.
You make the valleys gush with springs; and to all creatures refreshment bring.

The birds beside the waters dwell and sing in the branches, full and well.
You drench the mountains from above; the earth is sated by Your love.
You cause the grass for beasts to grow, and plants for food to feed us so;
and wine to gladden man's poor soul, and bread and oil to make us whole.

The trees You water with Your grace, the mighty cedars in their place;
in them the birds their dwellings build, and goats inhabit every hill.
You made the moon the times to mark; the sun declines; You made the dark.
By night the beasts pursue their prey, and man to labor goes by day.

How many are Your works, O Lord, which You have created by Your Word!
The earth and sea with creatures teem – they look to You to care and feed.

You give to them, they gather all; You hide Your face, they fail and fall.
You take their breath, they gasp and die; You send Your Spirit, they revive.

Lord, let Your glory long endure. Rejoice! His works are ever sure!
He looks on earth, it quails and quakes, as we our songs of praises make.
Lord, let our meditation rise and bring great pleasure in Your eyes.
Consumed shall sinners ever be. O, bless and praise the Lord with me!

Questions for Reflection

1. What's the difference between living "under the heavens" and "under the sun"?
2. Why is life "under the sun" a journey of vanity and grasping after the wind?
3. What has God called us to do in as His people and servants? How can we grow in wisdom?
4. What temptations will we need to recognize and resist as we grow in wisdom and knowledge? How can we help one another in this matter?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 1? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.