

chasing the wind

The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

Chapter 1: Life Without God

PRIMERS

Think about a day when your life seemed fruitless, like a little story that makes no difference. Try and remember a time when God rarely entered your mind or heart, when you lived apart from God. Have you ever felt that time is passing you by?

There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know. Harry S. Truman (1884-1972)

We have need of history in its entirety, not to fall back into it, but to see if we can escape from it. José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), Spanish essayist, philosopher. *The Revolt of the Masses*, ch. 10 (1930).

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.
George Santayana (1863-1952), U.S. philosopher, poet. *Life of Reason*, "Reason in Common Sense," ch. 12 (1905-6).

1. BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK

- Written by someone known as Preacher or Teacher (Hebrew, Qoheleth), Vs, 1
 - i. Likely Solomon (1:1,12, 16-17; 2:4-8; 12:9)
 - ii. Luther 's view
- “*Meaningless*” is a key word
 - i. (Hebrew, *hebel*)
 - ii. See the word at work in Job 9:29-31; 35:16; Ps. 94:11’; Isaiah 30:7;49:4
 - iii. 4 times in vs. 2 alone; 37 times in all
 - iv. Originally meant breath – fleeting, temporary
 - 1. The name Abel carries this meaning
 - 2. See Job 7:16; Psalm 39:4-11; 62:9; 144:4
- “*Under the sun*” another key phrase
 - i. 1:3; 29 times
 - ii. Means in this world, especially this world of sin
- Solomon will show us a life longing for the following:
 - i. God-given purpose
 - ii. Power to bring about change, to make a difference
 - iii. Wisdom to grasp the mysteries and enigmas of life
 - iv. An existence not under the sun
- The Book begs for the rest of Scripture, especially NT
 - i. 1 Cor 15:17-19, 58
17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men....58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.
- The sovereign will of God to act when and how He wills a major theme
- Only uses “*Elohim*” (never “*Yahweh*”) for God’s name (29 times) – accents sovereignty



- Is it Solomon writing about himself or Solomon writing about someone else? See 7:15. He writes perhaps near the end of his life (12:1)
- Uses “adam” for man/humanity 49 times
- “Chasing the wind” used 9 times in Chapters 1-6

2. CHAPTER 1 NOTES: LIFE WITHOUT GOD

- Vss. 1-11: Prologue – sets theme and mood
- Vs. 1: Title Page – Solomon the author?
- Vs. 2: The book’s theme with exclamation points (also at the end in 12:8)
 - i. “Meaningless” = fleeting, temporary, (like a breath), here today-gone tomorrow
 - ii. The word is meant to cover “everything”
- Vss. 3-9 a poem showing from creation the cyclical, routine of creation
 - i. Vs. 3: Cynical observation on work apart from purpose
 - ii. Vs.3: “Under the sun” covers all of creation = everywhere, anywhere
 - iii. Vss. 4-9: Evidence of the round-and-round we go attitude toward life comes from several quarters, all seeming to teach a lesson of “what goes around comes around,” leaving “all things...wearisome” and repetitive (vs. 9). The word translated “wearisome” can also mean “restless.” Examples:
 1. Vs. 4: Generations passing from old to new
 2. Vs. 5: The sun rising and setting
 3. Vs. 6: The wind eventually coming back to where it was
 4. Vs. 7: Streams flowing into the sea
 5. Life is a panorama (vs. 8) of “Been there, done that.”
- Vss. 10-11: As eye and ear have their fill of observation (vs. 8), the conclusion here is that “there is nothing new under the sun.” We’re restless to see something new and engaging, but what shows up is what’s always been.
 - The truth of it is only God creates something truly new; we rearrange or innovate.
 - Take God out of the picture, though, and what we think is new is really the same old thing. We’ve just forgotten it. The new idea probably was thought of long ago.
 - On the newness God brings to our lives see Jer 31:31; Lam 3:22-23; Jn 13:34; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:10; Rev 21:5.
- Vss. 12-14 capture the frustration of trying to figure out the mysteries of life. Ancient wisdom sought answers for every question. Qoheleth is saying that, as hard as we chase after wisdom, in the end it won’t change much. See Luke describing the wise philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:21); Paul on God’s unfathomable wisdom in Rom 11:33 and the foolishness of human wisdom apart from God in 1 Cor 1:20.
- Vs. 15 offers a proverb to show how human wisdom cannot change what God has put in place. See Eccl 7:13 for clarity here.
- Vss. 16-17 show the interplay of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.
- Vss. 13 and 18 share in common a view that to be wise can leave one burdened and saddened. To know is sometimes a curse rather than a blessing.
- For Jesus as wisdom that makes a difference, see Mt 12:42; James 3:17; 1 Cor 1:18-25, 30.

UNDER THE SUN TRUTHS

1. Work without purpose leaves us weary and disheartened.
2. The human heart longs for something new and will only be satisfied in Jesus Christ.
3. What we know can leave us heavily burdened.