



**ECCLESIASTES:
THE SOURCE OF MEANING**

Ecclesiastes Chapter 1: The Source of Meaning

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CHAPTER ONE

The Source of Meaning

Have you ever asked yourself: what is the meaning of life? Or perhaps you have pondered your existence and wondered, “What am I meant to do? Why do I exist?”

Many often say, “Once I found my true purpose and calling, I was able to live a full life.” What does that mean? How do you know when you have found your true purpose? Is it a culmination of your life’s work that adds up and eventually becomes some grandiose, monumental event? If so, what do you do after you have achieved this event? Do you sit back and do nothing? As Christians, these philosophical questions demand our attention to understand the source of meaning.

During the rise of the Enlightenment period, philosophical thought switched from the study of the divine to the study of man, asserting that answers and meaning start and end with knowledge that one can discover through human thought and reason. This rationalistic thinking exploded across the globe and continues today; however, philosophical inquiry is nothing new as many during the first century did the same. Scientific investigation aims to find some new meaning or item that has yet to be discovered. While this scientific endeavor has benefited society with the invention of modern technology, it was more of a discovery of parts of already existing matter and combining them to formulate a new item for use. The invention of the latest technology does not create something out of nothing. Instead, it creates from what already *exists*.

These philosophical inquiries have the semblance of “newness” as humanity continually searches for new beginnings, discover what has yet to be found, and ends to conquer the unconquerable. However, all of these pursuits ultimately do not satisfy or provide substantive solutions to life’s biggest questions. It merely scrapes the surface of what already is and what already has been. The quest in seeking, discovering, and inventing will never satisfy us, and we are always left with asking, “What’s next?”

So, then, is all of this for nothing? Should Christians not engage in STEM careers, embark in space exploration, or delve into atomic biology?

The meaning, purpose, and focus for God’s creatures are clearly outlined and described in the pages of Scripture.

Several literary genres are contained in the Bible, and all of them are profitable for teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness. Still, there is one genre Christians need to understand to live day-to-day life as they ask these seemingly impossible and yet meaningful questions: wisdom. The genre of wisdom is provided in Scripture to give us the answers to these questions. Whereas epistles, narratives, and prophetic literature contain both the spiritual and the physical, the book of Ecclesiastes narrows in on living “under the sun.” This phrase is only used in the book of Ecclesiastes to point and narrow our focus on how to live the here and now and yet still understand that there is a life to come.

Four books in the Bible fall into the wisdom genre (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs), and each of these addresses specific items necessary for Christians to understand. The purpose of these books is different than the rest of the Old Testament. Other books focus on the believe-and-obey-elements of the Christian faith, whereas the wisdom books focus on the thinking aspect of the Christian life. As Duvall and Hays state, “The imperatives of the wisdom literature—listen, look, think, reflect—combine to focus on the overarching purpose of these books: to develop character in the reader.”¹ The knowledge contained within the wisdom book is a collection of valuable insights into godly living, which, when applied, will create a godly character that will make wise choices in the difficulties Christians face in this life.² Whereas earthly philosophy focuses inwardly on man’s mind and what he does know, wisdom books focus on what God declares as the true meaning of life.

¹ Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. 2012. *Grasping God’s Word*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 465.

² William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Author and Purpose

Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes and is writing this book using himself as an example of someone who has seen it all, had it all, lived it all, and understands the futility of it all. Solomon was the son of David and Bathsheba and was the third king of the Israelite monarchy after Saul and David. In 1 Kings 3:4-15, Solomon and Yahweh interact in a dream when Yahweh asks what He should give Solomon.

*In Gibeon, Yahweh appeared to Solomon in a dream at night, and God said, "Ask what I should give to you."
-1 Kings 3:5*

After Yahweh asks Solomon this question, he asks for wisdom and the ability to discern between good and evil.

"So give Your slave a listening heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this glorious people of Yours?" – 1 Kings 3:9

Solomon's request to Yahweh was pleasing in the sight of the Lord, and Yahweh blessed him with wisdom, riches, and honor.

And God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to listen to justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I 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.

“I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days.- 1 Kings 3:11-13

Despite his wisdom and abundant wealth, Solomon is not an example to be followed in how he lived his life. He is celebrated for his wisdom and his construction in the building of the temple of God. Still, his wealth and exuberant lifestyle proved to be a problem for him as he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3). He did not always walk following the council of Yahweh. Yet, he still imparts his wisdom to us today in his many failures and his pursuit of meaning and happiness, and this is what we will see in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Solomon provides us with three significant motifs to categorize his earthly pursuits and the ultimate meaning to be found. We can break this down into the human quest for knowledge, the pursuit of pleasure, and the pursuit of possessions. These three are continually addressed throughout the 12 chapters of this book as he provides answers and reasons for his conclusion, which is not mentioned until the final chapter. Additionally, the covenant name of God Yahweh is not mentioned at all, but the name Elohim is mentioned in the final chapter and verse of Ecclesiastes.

The Nothingness of Everything

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Ecclesiastes 1:1*

The word preacher in Hebrew is *Qoheleth*, which is a speaker in an assembly, and the author identifies himself as Solomon, the son of David.³ Solomon identifies himself as the spokesman for Yahweh; he is not like the philosophers of today who speculate as to what could be true or what the possibilities are for answers to life's difficult questions. Instead, Solomon is personified as wisdom and identifies himself as the Preacher to declare the facts of life. An interesting note is that he focuses the title not on his Kingly reign but on his position as a preacher. The first verse and this chapter serves as an introduction for the remainder of the book in which Solomon narrates his journey through his life in pursuit of finding meaning here on the Earth.

*"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities!
All is vanity." Ecclesiastes 1:2*

The repetitious nature of the word vanity takes this to the superlative. Think about the phrase used in Isaiah 6 Holy-holy-holy to describe the supreme holiness of God. Here, it represents the supreme "nothingness" of everything. All is vanity. This raises the question, "What does he mean all is vanity?" Does he mean everything? We must be careful that we do not believe he is an annihilationist, stating forget everything; let us just end it all. He uses this to introduce us into the arena of human life and the experience that everyone goes through. This word is repeated throughout the book to

³ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 875.

describe the emptiness that accompanies earthly pursuits for meaning and significance.

What advantage does man have in all his labor In which he labors under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:3

The phrase “under the sun” refers to earthly endeavors, earthly pursuits, and everything done in the physical realm. He is not talking about spiritual items of concern; he is talking about the everyday aspects of life, waking up, working, bill paying, relationship building, and the lawn mowing aspects of life, the mundane disguised as important. He raises the question, “What advantage?” Or what does a person profit in all of their work on this earth? What do they have to show for all of their pursuits and labors to which they work?

This phrase is the overall theme of this book; everything apart from the existence and revealing of God to His creation has no meaning. This is not to invoke feelings of deep, dark depression; rather, it highlights an item of importance that we all must face: there is nothing good in us or this world outside of Christ (Romans 7:18).

The Finite Nature of our Earthly Existence

A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth stands forever. Ecclesiastes 1:4

People come and fade out of existence. For some time, I was highly interested in Ancestry.com research and spent significant time looking into my ancestors. Who they were,

what they did, and where they came from. An interesting item I noticed is after calling extended members of my family who knew records of some of the information; they did not know anyone past a specific time of their family. How many of you know who your great-grandparents great grandparents are? You don't; they have come and gone. Yet, during their lifetime, this life, the pursuits, the focus, was essential to them. We rarely comprehend this inevitable fact; eventually, you will be forgotten, and people will forget your name. Your great-great-great-grandchildren will not know that you existed, nor will they know what you were "known for" during your time on earth. These generations come and go, and the earth keeps on spinning.

My wife and I love the high desert and landscape of Arizona, for our tenth anniversary I purchased 10 acres of land off historic route 66 and built an off-grid shipping container home. As we drove to the area we came across many small towns and cities that looked like a time capsule from the 1950's-1960's. Speaking with one of the business owners I inquired about the towns history, to which the store owner informed me this town was booming during that era; however, now time had simply moved on into modernity while this town was left in the wake of time never to be the booming thriving bustling tourist city it once was.

*Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its
place it rises there again. Going toward the south, Then
circling toward the north, The wind goes circling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns. All the rivers*

go into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers go, There they continually go. Ecclesiastes 1:5-7

The world keeps on chugging along. The sun rises and sets, the wind blows, circles, and continues. The rivers are constantly flowing into the ocean, but the ocean doesn't rise. Why? The water evaporates, then it rains, then it falls into the river, then the river flows into the sea. The earth is a continual machine working, chugging along, grinding along. The earth doesn't stop spinning on its ecliptic; the tides do not stop the ebb and flow when you or I die. It does not take time to reflect on us mortals when we fade from existence. It continues and continues and continues. As the small towns in Arizona haven't "caught up" with the modern era, so too is life. What was once important becomes irrelevant, what was a popular destination to visit is now a forgotten distant memory that only those who lived remember, and those who discover merely appreciate.

The Garage Sale of Life

All things are wearisome; Man is not able to speak of it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing. Ecclesiastes 1:8-11

The pursuit of learning becomes boring, shallow, and pedantic. What one sees and what one hears does not quench the deep need and search for meaning. We all understand this, which is why our education is set in levels of degrees for education: elementary, middle, high, college, associates, bachelors, doctorate all of these have degrees of education to classify your educational pursuits. All these levels of learning

build into knowledge. But for what? You finish college with your degree in business management, and you have all this information, but now you must go and do it. Or you have a degree in a subject to which your degree and job are entirely unrelated. There is never a point in which one reaches in which satisfaction can be enjoyed, for when you believe that you have arrived the educational timeline continues, and if you do not continue to adapt and learn you will eventually become irrelevant.

What was all of that learning for?

That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has been for ages Which were before us. Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

What has happened, will happen again, will continue to happen. History repeats itself; it may have a new name or be new to you, but it is nothing new. Movements come and go, and we label it "a new movement." there is nothing new about it; it has already been around. It may have been dormant for several decades but will be repackaged, resold, and redistributed to foolish men. We cannot look at our present and state, "Wow, something like this has never transpired before in history." You aren't looking back into history; you cannot say that. There may be new technology that hasn't previously existed, but if you remove the technology and focus on the action, it becomes clear that the underlying issue is nothing new,

There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will be, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later still.
Ecclesiastes 1:11

All your previous personalities, accomplishments, titles, and accolades. No one will remember them; why do we look at what we are doing as the most important thing ever? You may be working and dedicating yourself to your job at the expense of your family or spiritual growth; however, no one will remember your ability to create and publish those spreadsheets. The documents and personal records of running, swimming, lifting, shooting, and golfing are fading away, drifting into the distance.

On June 23, 1944, the worst tornado storm took place across West Virginia into Pennsylvania. Several tornadoes swept through many towns destroying them leaving devastation in it's wake. Many of these tornadoes were rated F4 on the Fujita scale of tornadoes leaving over 150 dead in it's aftermath. At that time and for those residents life was never as hard and depressing as in that moment; however, time continues on and now it is but a distant forgotten memory for those of us today.⁴

I love to fish and had a nice center console boat to take friends out for deep-sea fishing. On one such occasion, I brought out my boss and his son at the church where I was employed for a fun afternoon of fishing. We were about thirteen miles off the coast of Florida, and his son was hot and wanted to swim while we were anchored. Before I could toss out a float line for him to hold onto, he jumped in and immediately began drifting

⁴ The Shinnston tornado was part of a larger tornado outbreak that plagued the Appalachia region from June 22-23, 1944.
<https://www.wowktv.com/news/west-virginia/devilish-mechanizations-of-man-or-war-one-of-the-deadliest-tornados-in-u-s-history-was-in-west-virginia/>

away due to the current. My friend then jumped in after his son in an attempt to retrieve him back into the boat; however, he, too, began to drift away at an alarming rate. While my other fishing companion and I started pulling up the 120 feet of line for the anchor to get them, my friend and his son disappeared in the distance of the waves. This is a description of the drift that happens in our life with all of these items, accomplishments, and possessions; it drifts into the distance and is remembered no more. Unlike this life, by God's grace, we got the anchor line up and safely retrieved both my boss and his son. However, it is an excellent illustration demonstrating that no matter how hard he tried to swim back to the boat, the drift (time) cannot be recovered no matter how hard we want it to or wish it to. You cannot repeat the past; ultimately, things will fade away, and you will even become a distant memory.

A principal truth maxim we often do not consider is that those who come after you will not remember you. All the stuff in your house? When you die, it will be sold in a garage sale, put out on the curb, given away, or hauled off to the dump and thrown out. What is important to you isn't as important to everyone else.

Solomon now addresses one of the arenas in which mankind looks to find meaning and purpose in this life through the process of learning.

The Self Critique of Learning

*I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem
And I gave my heart to seek and explore by wisdom*

concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous endeavor which God has given to the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. Ecclesiastes 1:12–13

Solomon is stating, I have pursued and attained knowledge and wisdom. I have been everywhere and talked with everyone; all sons of men (mankind) are and will be occupied with looking to acquire higher knowledge.

I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is bent cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. Ecclesiastes 1:14–15

All of the wise sages, philosophers, and scribes Solomon has interacted with, talked with, and learned from he has learned one universal truth. You cannot straighten items which are not meant to be straight. You cannot fix or undo something that has been done. There are no “do-overs,” there are no respawns. There are no mulligans. You cannot begin to assume and pile up everything you lack; it is innumerable. The world at its core and everything within this earth is flawed and imperfect. There must be something outside the system, outside of the world we know and see, that brings purpose and meaning. We cannot fix the world; we cannot reverse the gears and rewind time. In verse 15, Solomon is highlighting the problem that we cannot truly comprehend all of what we do not know, with what we think we know.

I spoke within my heart, saying, “Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my heart has seen an abundance

of wisdom and knowledge.” And I gave my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and simpleminded folly; I came to know that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much vexation, and whoever increases knowledge increases pain. Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Solomon states here that he has explored every angel, researched every item, hired every expert, and consulted every spiritual guru. Solomon has explored, studied, investigated, and researched; he left no stone unturned in his pursuit of meaning through knowledge. In verse 17, Solomon states that this pursuit of seeking wisdom and knowledge was a sincere genuine pursuit. In verses 13, 16 & 17, Solomon states:

I gave my heart (vs.13)

I spoke within my heart (vs.16)

I gave my heart (vs.17)

He uses the same Hebrew word heart (lēb), which in biblical terminology is not only the center of human spiritual activity but also the will of the individual, the desires, and the emotions, indicating that Solomon was in complete and total commitment to pursuing the intellectual endeavors in search of meaning, and what was his summation? In much wisdom, there is much vexation: the more you learn, the more you get angry and frustrated. “Whoever increases knowledge increases pain.”⁵

This means that despite all of the knowledge one could ever attain in one’s life, compiling all of the data and information still does not provide meaning because it is a part of and derived

5 William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 171.

from and within a fallen world. Information derived from a fallible source provides fallible results. Finite creatures looking at finite information cannot understand nor develop an infinite purpose. Charles Bridges states, “Intelligence in all the branches of natural science gives no help to a right understanding of the Gospel.”⁶ The more one learns the more one begins to understand how much they still have yet to understand and discover, and this leads to frustration.

The first chapter in this book may seem macabre; however, what Solomon points the reader to is the ultimate truth in this life. One cannot find true purpose and meaning in seeking after knowledge in hopes of finding meaning in this endeavor. It is not meant to discourage the reader, rather it should prompt the reader to consider their pursuit of purpose and meaning and raise an awareness that Earthly knowledge cannot bring about divine understanding to the reason for humanity’s existence.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. What legacy do you hope you will be remembered for leaving?*
- 2. Do you seek and hold godly wisdom as being supreme over earthly wisdom?*
- 3. Summarize your thoughts into one sentence on how this chapter applies to what you are doing and how you are viewing this life?*

⁶ Bridges, Charles, *Ecclesiastes: The Geneva Series Of Commentaries*.⁵ Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner Of Truth Trust, The, 1860, 1992, 25.

