

# notes

series: meaning

text: ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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

2 *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

3 *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

4 *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.*

5 *The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.*

6 *The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.*

7 *All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow,*

*there they flow again.*

8 *All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*

9 *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.*

10 *Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.*

11 *There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.*

## commentary

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 is a prologue and summary of the twelve chapter book. Solomon establishes his anything-but-chipper theme that for the entire book, that life is meaningless and nothing is new under the sun.

1 Ecclesiastes somewhat appears to be a journal which contains the words of somebody who longs to impart God's truth reflected in his personal experience. Solomon thus gives himself the title, "Preacher." His first objective is to show that he has learned something of value that he wants to pass on to somebody else. He also designates himself as "son of David, king in Jerusalem." Historically, this would mean the author is King Solomon.

Solomon is known as having been one of the most wealthy, powerful, wise, and hedonistic people to ever have lived. His fame has lasted for millennia. Of possibly most notable infamy, is his wisdom. He was allowed one request God promised to grant (1 Kings 3). Instead of asking for power or wealth, he asked for wisdom. Seeing that this was a noble request, God not only made him the wisest person on earth, but also the wealthiest and most powerful.

Solomon is also famous for his sexual indulgences. He not only wrote Ecclesiastes and several of the Psalms and Proverbs, but he is attributed for writing the beautifully poetic "Song of Solomon," which is an erotic chronicle of his own marital sexual intimacy. This book was so hot that Jewish boys were prohibited from reading its contents until the age of 14! Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). If there has ever been a person who searched for meaning in the things of this world, it was Solomon. It is arguable that he lived larger than anybody ever has; and so, at the end of his life he writes about what fulfillment, if any, he was able to gain from his vast experience.

**2** He summarizes what he found in his experiences in one word: “Vanity!” Whatever he has pursued in his life ended up being an empty plight. Most people would agree that there are seemingly pointless aspects to life, but Solomon quantifies every pursuit for meaning as falling into the “pointless” category.

**3** This verse asks the rhetorical question that can simply be answered “nothing.” This is especially bad news for those who pour themselves into work and derive their value in their own efforts. For all that we work for in this life, we are only left at the end with nothing that really lasts.

This relates to the idea of religion, too. The Bible makes it clear that no efforts can possibly make us right with God. In fact, our own salvation was made possible only when Jesus, himself, came and lived a perfect life and paid the death penalty for our unrighteousness. This is something we are completely incapable of doing; however, the good news is that Jesus gives us credit for his work before God. Without God intervening on our behalf, our work is completely vain, pointless, and seeks only our own glory.

**4** A common theme throughout the book is that no matter how much we may attempt to make a name for ourselves, we are only forgotten by the next generation. Here, Solomon also introduces the idea that existence is merely a circular pattern of what happened before. Nothing is new. The fact that “generations come and generations go” is all part of the vanity.

**5-7** Nature testifies to this circular meaninglessness. It testifies that there is really nothing new, but rather repetition and variation of what already has occurred. Things come and go as before, just like the sun rising and setting. The wind blows every-which-way, yet eventually blows where it did before. All we can predict by looking at nature is the fact that the same thing is bound to happen all over again! The hydrologic cycle also bears testimony to the fact that what happened will happen again and it is all the same water raining on us, crashing in the mighty ocean waves, and flowing under the same bridge over and over and over again.

**8** Having used his senses to test everything on earth for meaning, Solomon recounts the weariness of this endless lack of meaning. The more one has, the more they want. We never get to the point where anything of temporal nature satisfies us because it is really nothing new. Things get tired really fast, and even though they may spark our interest, we continually search for newness.

**9-10** Not only that, but those who have new ideas and may appear to be breaking new ground are merely repeating what has happened before or bringing variation to something that already exists. According to Solomon, striving for a new idea is a waste of time and only makes one weary. We may think we have something new, and it may gratify us for a bit, but in the end, it becomes outdated and irrelevant like purchasing the latest computer only to have the new version come out 1 month later.

**11** If we think we are really something and the mark we leave will last for generations, Solomon stops us in our tracks and reminds us that chances are we will not be remembered.

# personal reflection

**Sunday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:1-11.* What about the sermon today could you relate to? What about it was encouraging and difficult for you? Are there any changes you'll make as a result of what you heard today?

**Monday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:1.* What do you think makes Solomon qualified to write this book? Is he worth listening to? What kind of experience(s) have you had in your life that have qualified you to teach others who haven't learned your lessons?

**Tuesday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:2-3.* Take some time to contemplate the vanity of things under the sun. Write down your honest answers to Solomon's question in v. 3. How do your answers reveal what is important to you?

**Wednesday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:4.* Contemplate the brevity of life. Why do you think you are here for such a short amount of time? If everything Solomon saw in this world ("under the sun") was meaningless, what purpose might God have for your life?

**Thursday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:5-7.* Solomon writes about the repetition of life. This repetition can become a rut. What causes the rut and consider why Jesus is the way out of the rut.

**Friday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:8.* Here, Solomon dives right into the root of the problem of life's vanity: There is an aspect of our heart that is insatiable. Why is this? List some things you're looking to for fulfillment. Are they enough? A good way to determine if they are is, do they make you weary? If so, how does this verse speak into your life? If not, think back on a time when you were weary. According to this verse, what was the reason for that.

**Saturday** - *Reflect on Eccl. 1:0-11.* On Sunday, we ended our look at this passage by saying, "anytime you take a good thing and turn it into an ultimate thing, you have ensured that that thing will crush you." When have you seen this true in your life? What, right now, are you looking at for validation other than Jesus? Take some time to ask God to fill that void and help you make the change to see Jesus as your only source of meaning.

# for groups

## Ice breaker: Who do you think is most accurate and why (pick one)?

- Mic Jagger - *"I can't get no satisfaction."*
- Mark Twain - *"A man cannot be comfortable without his own approval."*
- Charlie Sheen - *"Oh, that. I just do that for the extra money, and to satisfy my male need to kill and win."*
- C.S. Lewis - *"What does not satisfy when we find it, was not the thing we were desiring."*
- Aristotle - *"Happiness is the meaning an the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence."*
- Walt Whitman - *"Whatever satisfies the soul is truth."*

## Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 together.

1. What are your initial thoughts about Solomon's perspective (*"All is vanity"*)? How accurate do you think he is?
2. What purpose could God really have for our short lives if everything on earth is meaningless?
3. On Sunday, we talked about the repetition of life and how we can start to feel in a rut that leaves us bored. Where have you seen this rut in your life? Does the rut ever end?
4. In verse 8, Solomon brings up the fact that we all are insatiable. Is this what God intends for us? How does this jive with the fact that the Bible says all God does is out of love?
5. Read these verses and discuss how they answer question 4:
  - John 10:10
  - John 1:1-4
  - John 6:63
  - Luke 14:26
  - John 3:36
  - John 5:40
  - Luke 17:33

**Take some time to pray together, asking Jesus to be your source of a full life.**

