The Search for Significance on Earth
Exploring the Meaning of Life
Lesson 2

Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 11
The Vanity of Life

Rick Warren, in his book “The Purpose Drive Life,” quotes this “aha moment” in the life of Russian novelist, Andrei Bitov as he struggled with the meaning of life. Consider what he says:

- “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the Metro in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) I was overcome with despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: Without God, life makes no sense. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the Metro and walked into God’s light.”

I believe the above statement captures the essences of Solomon’s conclusion to his personal quest to find meaning in life through what he could experience on earth. At the end of a long unfulfilling search, for what God had already given him, Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes what Bitov early in his life came to understand that “without God life makes no sense?” Looking through the eyes of Solomon, we start our study with what he determines is the vanity of life.

The Vanity of Life – Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 11

In the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, Solomon identifies himself and lays out the primary purpose for which he writes the book. He grabs our attention by telling us the overall key to this work is “the vanity of life,” then he holds us captive by revealing the conclusion of his quest in a question, “what does life profit?”

In verse 1, Solomon identifies himself in three different ways: as the “Preacher,” as David’s son, and as king in Jerusalem.

1. Why do you think Solomon identifies himself this way, and why is it important to the reader?

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In verse 2, Solomon breaks open the key to the book and reveals how he feels about his quest “vanity of vanities; all is vanity.”

2. What’s the major point of this statement and how would you characterize this point of view?
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3. How would you interpret the word “all is vanity” in this expression?
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In verse 3, Solomon asks the defining question “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?”

4. From what perspective does Solomon ask this question and why does it matter?
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5. How does this question support the premise of “vanity,” advanced in verse 2?
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6. Compare verse 3 and 1 Corinthians 15:19. Do these verses agree and what are we to learn?
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7. In the phase “under the sun,” is Solomon condemning all of man’s hard work and efforts? If not, what is he saying?

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I. The Transient Nature of Life

Now, to give credence to the theme that life under the sun is “vanity,” in verses 4-7, Solomon compares what he has observed about the cycle of nature and the course of human life. He concludes that human-life is fleeting and all creation is caught in a never-ending cycle of sameness. To confirm this conclusion he gives these four examples:

- **The Earth Abides (v4)**
  Human life is fleeting … but the earth remains the same.

- **The Sun Orbits (v5)**
  The sun takes the same course every day … it comes up and it goes down.

- **The Wind Whirls (v6)**
  The wind moves in all directions … you can’t see it but it’s the wind.

- **The Sea Flows (v7)**
  The rivers all flow into the sea that never gets full … the water returns and fills the sea again.

8. What does Solomon use of these natural examples illustrate about the transient nature of life?

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II. The Disappointing Nature of Life

To strengthen his premise that life under the sun is “vanity,” in verses 8-11, Solomon demonstrates that everything and everyone in life will ultimately disappoint us.\(^2\) to confirm this conclusion he gives these four basic reasons:

- **Nothing Satisfies (v8)**
  Human desire is insatiable … even though everything is difficult.

- **Nothing Different (v9)**
  Everything seems to stay the same… today only repeats yesterday.

- **Nothing New (v10)**
  Nothing is truly original… everything that is now, was before.

- **Nothing Remembered (v11)**
  We don’t remember the past… future generations won’t remember today.

9. What can I learn from Solomon’s illustration of the disappointing nature of life? How does this information make you feel about life?

For the purposes of this study in Ecclesiastes Solomon’s premise is, that God has spoken no promises, He has made no covenants, He has given us no direction as to how we should be or live. We abide under the sun, with no word from God; therefore, we only draw conclusions from the world as it presents itself to us.\(^3\)

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1 Andy McLean - M.A. Biola University; M.Div., Th.M. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.
2 Keith R. Krell - The Good Life - Ecclesiastes Overview – “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow” (Eccl.1:1-11)
3 Steve Zeisler, “Is Life a Treadmill” (Eccl. 1:1-12)