

**Leaving a Legacy**  
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

**ECCLESIASTES**

One of the most difficult books in the Bible for me is the Book of Ecclesiastes. Most people have heard snatches of Ecclesiastes whether they realize it or not. Have you ever heard the saying “there is nothing new under the sun”? That’s part of chapter 2, verse 9. Or how about the song “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds? The lyrics begin like this:

*To everything, (turn, turn, turn)  
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)  
And a time to every purpose, under heaven*

The remainder of the song, with only a small amount of reordering, directly quotes Ecclesiastes 3:2-8 -

*A time to be born, a time to die  
A time to plant, a time to reap  
A time to kill, a time to heal  
A time to laugh, a time to weep  
  
A time to build up, a time to break down  
A time to dance, a time to mourn  
A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together  
  
A time of love, a time of hate  
A time of war, a time of peace  
A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing  
  
A time to gain, a time to lose  
A time to rend, a time to sew  
A time for love, a time for hate  
A time for peace, I swear it's not too late*

The Byrds only left half a verse out that is present in scripture: “a time for war” – but maybe that’s because the song was released in 1965, when the U.S. had been embroiled in Vietnam for 10 years. A “time for war” goes without saying.

While we are familiar with parts of Ecclesiastes, and the book isn’t hard to read – there are no long lists of begats or unpronounceable names, for example – the meaning of the text is difficult to face. The author is writing from the perspective of the end of his life, looking back over all he has experienced and learned, and deciding that human existence is as insubstantial as breath, a chasing after the wind.

**THE AUTHOR**

The author of this book wrote as if he were King Solomon and we know this because he introduced the text by writing, “The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” When the author claims Solomon’s identity, he also claims many of the things we know about him. We know from 1 Kings 3:3-14 that when the LORD said to Solomon, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon asked for wisdom. You may have heard an example of Solomon exercising that wisdom when two women came before him with a baby, each saying that the child was hers. When he called for a sword to divide the child in two, one of the women begged Solomon to give the child to the other woman rather than see him killed. It was in this way that Solomon knew the true mother of the child.

Solomon was also known for his wealth, and his military campaigns and *many* marital arrangements expanded the borders of Israel to the widest it would know. Solomon is also known for commissioning the first Temple in Jerusalem and an enormous palace. From the perspective of someone on the outside, Solomon had everything anyone could want.

The author of Ecclesiastes was looking through Solomon’s eyes, however, and what he saw was vanity, meaninglessness, and futility. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t perceive anything that ultimately mattered in the end. In chapter 1, verses 2-11, he describes it like this:

## **SCRIPTURE**

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

What do people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?

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

The sun rises, and the sun goes down  
and hurries to the place where it rises.

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

All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.

All things are wearisome,  
more than one can express;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing  
or the ear filled with hearing.

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

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

The people of long ago are not remembered,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of people yet to come  
by those who come after them.

## **STRUGGLE FOR MEANING**

This perception of life is what the author of Ecclesiastes struggles with throughout the book. First, he looked to the practice of wisdom; he used it to "search out all that is done under heaven" and decided that "the business God has given to humans [was] vanity and a chasing after wind."

Second, he turned to indulgence, accomplishment, and accumulation of wealth. He "cheer[ed] his body with wine" and "delights of the flesh"; "whatever [his] eyes desired, [he] did not keep from them". He "made great works" and "had great possessions of herds and flocks [and] gathered ... silver and gold and the treasures of kings". Yet when Solomon "considered all that [his] hands had done and the toil [he] had spent in doing it ... all was vanity and a chasing after wind..."

Third, he looked at the value of having a successor, but concluded that this too was madness and folly, "for what [could] the king's successor do? Only what [had] already been done". When we consider what happened to the kingdom under the leadership of Solomon's sons, even that idea was ambitious. Less than a generation after Solomon's death, his sons' competition for the throne broke the realm into two kingdoms striving against each other. Later successors would lead both kingdoms away from God and down the road to destruction, with the northern one being conquered by the Assyrians and the southern one being conquered by the Babylonians.

According to the author of Ecclesiastes, only two things made life worth living: enjoying themselves and having a friend. In chapter 3, verses 12-13, he states, "I know that there is nothing better for [human beings] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." In chapter 4, verses 9-10, he writes, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help."

### **I AGREE ... ISH**

I agree with the author's conclusions up to a point. I can name several examples of people putting stock in wisdom only to see it crumble when faced with reality. I see too many people consumed with accumulating wealth only to realize that what they've done didn't matter in the end. Some of these people are lucky enough to have time to make a change; others find themselves at the end of their lives regretting the time they spent working and wish they had spent more time at more meaningful pursuits. I also know instances of siblings fighting over their parents' estates, dividing it like spoils of war and never speaking to each other again.

Yet that is where the author's understanding and mine part ways. I find it ridiculous that the meaning of life is to enjoy God's blessing of the fruits of one's labor. All you have to do is find a homeless person trapped in mental illness to know that not all people have that chance. And while having friends and a partner to love can ease life's burdens, even the best relationships end in death and many end up alone.

### **VANITY ... OR NOT**

So where does that leave us? I believe if we stop with Solomon's conclusions, life *is* vanity and a chasing after the wind. But that's not where *God* leaves *us*. Between Solomon's time and our own, God sent word of a Messiah, an anointed savior, who would be the many-greats-grandson of Solomon coincidentally enough – how's that for a successor? Then Jesus was born into the world to fulfill the words of the prophets. He revealed in fullness God's ultimate answer to the futility and suffering of life: the answer of resurrected and everlasting life. Yet this is only part of God's word of salvation. We need not wait until our earthly lives are over before experiencing and passing on true life.

### **GOD'S BLESSING – A TRUE LEGACY**

The author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "I know that there is nothing better for [human beings] than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil." Yet we know that the meaning of life is more than God's gift of personal happiness and enjoyment in the fruits of our labor. God's ultimate gift is one of salvation and resurrection, and not just for us alone. Just as Jesus' teaching, healing, feeding, and sacrifice reached beyond himself to the disciples who inherited his salvation. These disciples continued his work and led others to salvation on through history, leaving an enduring legacy until we, ourselves, were saved. We are the disciples of Christ – not just in denomination, but in identity. As such and as Christ's body in the world, we are charged with leaving this same legacy in the people who have not yet been brought to life by the salvation of God. There are people in our communities and are yet unborn who need to know life is more than a chasing after the wind. God's wind – God's spirit – chases *them* until all live in the Realm of God.