

Session 1

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Memory Verse

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

– ECCLESIASTES 1:9, CSB



Nothing New Under the Sun

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Life on earth without God at its center is futile.

CALL TO ACTION: Where are you seeking fulfillment in things that will never satisfy? What needs to change?

Several years ago, two amateur British treasure hunters, Andy Sampson and Paul Adams, made the discovery of a lifetime. While combing a field on the Essex/Suffolk border with a metal detector, they found a cache of pottery and more than 50 gold Roman coins.

You can imagine how exciting this must have been! What an exciting find. How did they get here? What were they worth? Andy and Paul believed the find to be worth up to £250,000 and started making plans to pay off their mortgages and book dream vacations.

Unfortunately, they soon learned the coins and pottery they'd found had been left behind by a film crew of a BBC comedy show, "Detectorists" (clearly the props department did their job well!). The field they were searching had been used as a filming location for the show over the summer, and some coins were inadvertently buried during filming.¹

This happens in life. We expect one outcome and instead are dealt another. We chase the things our culture tells us will bring contentment but, in the end, it only brings . . . more chasing. This reality isn't new. In fact, the wise King Solomon recognized it thousands of years ago, and wrote about this truth in the book of Ecclesiastes.



How can you relate to Andy and Paul's story? Has something like this ever happened to you or someone you know?



What kinds of things does our society tell us to chase that often lead to disappointment?

Session Summary

Today we are beginning a new series on Ecclesiastes. This book was written by King Solomon, known for his great wisdom (bestowed upon him by the source of wisdom: God).

Our reading today includes a central point of the book: “Everything is futile” (v. 2). Solomon illustrates this point using circular patterns in nature. The sun rises and sets repeatedly. Rivers flow into the sea and never stop. What is the point?

If “there is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9), and the world will keep right on spinning after we are gone, what are we living for? Indeed, Solomon argued that after a few generations, “There is no remembrance of those who came before” (v. 11) and then the same thing will happen to the generations that follow after. Life on earth without God at its center really is futile.

1. The Teacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)



What does it mean that “everything is futile” (v. 2)? Does that mean nothing matters?



When have you felt this reality?

Money really doesn’t buy happiness, and Solomon would know (1 Kings 3:13; 2 Chronicles 1:15). Solomon, King David’s son by Bathsheba, succeeded David on the throne and served as the third and final king of the united kingdom. When God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked, “What should I give you?” (1 Kings 3:5), Solomon answered righteously, asking

for wisdom in ruling God's people. Because he responded well, God granted him both wisdom and riches and honor. Solomon's wisdom was truly legendary.

Solomon didn't get everything right (in fact, he got some pretty major things wrong), but one of the fruits of Solomon's gift of wisdom from the Lord was the wisdom literature that still exists for believers to study and learn from today, like Ecclesiastes and much of Proverbs.

Ecclesiastes deals with an age-old question—What's the point? If money can't buy happiness, we aren't able to create anything truly new or sustaining, and everyone will forget we even existed in a few measly generations. So, what's the purpose of life? We'll explore this throughout our study of the book, and glean the wisdom we can as we go.

Verse 1 announces the author of the book, and verse 2 introduces a central theme: "Everything is futile" (v. 2).

Other translations render this as "meaningless" (NIV) and "vanity" (ESV), but the Hebrew word here is *hevel*.² Thirty-eight of the seventy-three times this word is used in the Old Testament are found in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Hevel is used to describe the worthlessness of idol worship, the fleetingness of life in Job and Psalms (here one day and gone the next, like a breath on a cold morning), the temporary status of beauty in Proverbs 31 (v. 30), and situations where the outcome doesn't quite match the results expected. The prophet Isaiah used *hevel* in reference to where the Israelites had misplaced their trust (idols and foreign kings over Yahweh; Isaiah 30:7; 41:29; 44:9; 57:13).

The use of this term communicates that a thing can have some value, but that value is fleeting. We'll break this down as we go, but one question this should stir up in us is: Where are we ultimately placing our hope and trust—in futile things, or in eternal ones?



How would you answer the question above? How does the evidence of your life support or deny this claim?

2. Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 1:3-7)



What point did Solomon make by alluding to the cycles of nature?



Why is nature a helpful illustration to make this point?

Solomon followed up his claim that “Everything is futile” (v. 2) with evidence from nature.

“Under the sun” refers to life on earth (v. 3), and Solomon took a broad view in these verses. He asked what all our effort amounts to? Several generations down the line, will anyone even remember us?

Solomon painted a picture of the circular rhythm of nature. Every day, the sun rises, sets, then does it all again the next day. The wind blows and blows in cycle. Water flows into a sea that never fills, still it flows continuously.

Solomon’s point? Nature is constantly in motion but never seems to reach a successful conclusion. It just keeps going. And it doesn’t need our help to do it. The earth will go on spinning without us on it.



What is a pattern in nature or in your life that makes you feel futile at times? Why?

Though Solomon’s understanding of patterns in nature was different than today, we can see his point. Namely, what’s the point?

3. Nothing New (Ecclesiastes 1:8-11)

 What point did Solomon make in these verses?

 How do Solomon's conclusions make you feel? Hopeful? Discouraged? Something else? Why?

Everything is . . . wearisome. After living many years, we better understand how someone could reach this conclusion. The second part of verse eight feels fitting for our current cultural moment:

The eye is not satisfied by seeing
or the ear filled with hearing. —Ecclesiastes 1:8b

Discontentment runs rampant in our world, and our culture is built on the idea that we should never be satisfied. We're encouraged to work hard for more. In many spaces, we are measured by our accomplishments and what we have accumulated. But the more we have, the more we want.

But this isn't new. Humans have always had the tendency to lack satisfaction. The hamster wheel of "more" really is wearisome. And there is nothing new under the sun (1:9).

But wait. Technically speaking, there are new things under the sun, right? We can name scores of things humans have created since Solomon sat on Israel's throne. Solomon's point was we are not going to discover anything that fundamentally changes the reality of the human condition.³

We have already lived to see the rise of AI, and may live to see medical miracles like the cure for cancer. These things certainly have an effect on our everyday lives! Still, we are all headed to one eventual end, and no new creation can avoid it.

And, a few generations after we die, "There is no remembrance of those who came before" (v. 11) and then our descendants will suffer the same fate.



What do you know about those who live three or four generations before you—even family members? How does this convey the truth of Solomon's words?

Wow! This feels heavy and depressing, right? So, where does this leave us? What is the point? This is where we will go as we continue our study in the coming weeks.

Conclusion

What is the point?

It's a fair question. Solomon was the wisest person who ever lived, so he spoke the truth. Does this passage really mean there is no point to living and working hard?

We know that can't be the case! Jesus gave very important commands about how we are to live. Here are a couple:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." —Acts 1:8

"I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." —John 13:34-35

Likewise, the Bible teaches us to work hard:

Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people. —Colossians 3:23

So, if there clearly is a point to living, and not everything is truly futile . . . how should we understand this passage?

The fact is, life, in the grand scheme of things, is futile when lived apart from God. Chasing what culture tells us to value isn't going to matter significantly as time marches on. When we're gone, the sun will still rise and set. The wind will still blow. Streams will still flow into an ocean that is never "full." Our lives are similarly futile unless we hold the Creator at their center.

One thing that is not futile? Our faith. Our belief in Jesus and following Him and obediently submitting to His will in our lives matters greatly. We can make an eternal impact by living faithfully as we sow seeds of the gospel and invite others into a meaningful eternity.



How have you been tempted to chase futile things in your life? What happened?



Have you ever come to a point in your life where you thought . . . what's the point? How do you answer that question?



What does today's reading teach us about God and His character?

Memorize

*What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.*
- Ecclesiastes 1:9, CSB

References

¹[bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-42887063](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-42887063)

²Miles Custis and James S. Reitman, "Ecclesiastes, Book of," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Lexham Press, 2016).

³Duane A. Garrett, "Ecclesiastes," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).