

Nothing New Under the Sun

August 2, 2026

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Session Outline

1. The Teacher (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)
2. Under the Sun (Ecclesiastes 1:3-7)
3. Nothing New (Ecclesiastes 1:8-11)

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?

Nothing New Under the Sun

Introduction

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.

In Need of New

All of nature is in constant motion and yet is going nowhere. This is a parable of human life; it is a long flurry of activity that accomplishes nothing permanent. Not only that, but there is nothing new in this world. “New” does not mean merely unfamiliar or novel but something fresh that breaks into the cycle of life and gives meaning and value. The desperate needs of humanity described here are answered in Christ, in whom we have a new covenant, a new birth, a new commandment, and a new life.

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?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for giving us meaning in life. Thank Him for giving us something to live for and ways He can work through us to create an impact that is eternal. Ask Him to help you see where you are chasing futile things in your life, and how to course correct.

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*

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* by Daniel Akin and Jonathan Akin
- *Be Satisfied* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Ecclesiastes* by Philip Graham Ryken



Historical Context of Ecclesiastes

Purpose

Ecclesiastes shows us that since we and our works are futile—that is, destined to perish—we must not waste our lives trying to justify our existence with pursuits that ultimately mean nothing. Put simply, Ecclesiastes examines major endeavors of life in light of the reality of death.

Author

According to 1:1 and 1:12, the author was David's son and a king over Israel from Jerusalem. Also, 12:9 speaks of the author as a writer of proverbs, so Solomon appears to be the author. Many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written too late in Israel's history for this to be true, and they want to date the book at least five hundred years after Solomon's time (later than 450 BC). However, strong evidence attests that the book does come from the age of Solomon. For instance, it displays a great knowledge of literature from early Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Setting

Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature, meaning that it is in the part of the Bible especially concerned with helping readers cope with the practical and philosophical issues of life. It has roots in the Wisdom literature of Egypt and Babylon. Books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the biblical answer to the search for truth. Proverbs is basic wisdom, giving the reader fundamental principles to live by. Ecclesiastes, by contrast, is for a more mature reader. It engages the question of whether death nullifies all purpose and meaning in life.

Special Features

The Bible is never shy about confronting painful truths or hard questions. The book of Ecclesiastes faces the issue of how we can find meaning in life in light of the seemingly futile nature of everything. It will not allow the reader to retreat into superficial answers. It does not answer this problem by comforting us with hollow slogans. To the contrary, its motto is "Everything Is Futile." But by forcing us to face the futility of human existence, it guides us to a life free of empty purpose and deceitful vindication.

Extended Commentary

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1:1 The Hebrew word *qoheleth*, here translated as Teacher, probably means “assembly leader.” It is not the ordinary word for “teacher.” It is a rare Hebrew word (found seven times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Bible), and it could mean “public speaker.” It is the author’s self-designation throughout the book. For this reason the book of Ecclesiastes is often called “Qoheleth.” The words son of David, king in Jerusalem could refer to any Davidic king of Judah, but only Solomon was king over all Israel from Jerusalem (v. 12).

1:2 *Hevel*, the Hebrew word for futile, basically means “vapor” or “breath,” but it comes to mean “vain,” “transitory,” or “futile.” It does not necessarily mean that something is altogether worthless, but it implies that something is at best only of fleeting value. In the context of Ecclesiastes, it means that things done “under the sun” are only of temporary significance and therefore, set against eternity, they have no real value.

1:3–7 The phrase under the sun means here on earth; it speaks of the temporal and temporary nature of humanity. The sun ... wind, and waters (streams) are in constant motion, but they never accomplish anything. It is simply a constant cycle of coming and going. In the same way, each generation comes and goes but does not change the world in any fundamental way. Worse yet, each generation of people (unlike the sun, wind, and waters) passes away.

1:3 The net gain for a lifetime of hard labor on earth is zero.

1:4–7 There is an apparent monotony and purposelessness to nature. The rivers continually flow into the sea with no evident effect. See Rm 8:19–21.

1:8 The phrase all things are wearisome could be translated “all words are weary.” It refers to our inability to find either meaning or satisfaction in creation. No one can speak in the face of all the ceaseless motion of the sun, wind, and waters. That is, the world cannot be adequately explained or in any way affected by the human word. We stand dumb before it. Similarly, we neither see nor hear anything that fully satisfies.

Hevel may originate in the sound of breath (Is 57:13). It may have produced a verb (*haval*) that occurs five times, once used as keep up empty talk (Jb 27:12). *Haval* denotes become worthless (Jr 2:5) or place false hope (Ps 62:10). The causative means delude (Jr 23:16). Breath as transient and apparently insignificant underlies all metaphorical uses of *hevel*. It can indicate vapor (Ps 39:5) or mist (Pr 21:6), but the idea of little worth is always present. *Hevel* connotes fraud (Pr 13:11). It signifies empty (Jb 27:12), worthless (Jr 10:3), meaningless (Ps 94:11), futile (Jb 21:34), fleeting (Pr 31:30), or in vain (Lm 4:17). It describes man (Ps 62:9). This key word in Ecclesiastes suggests futility except at Ec 9:9. Absolute futility is literally “futility of futilities” (Ec 1:2). The plural often denotes worthless idols (Dt 32:21) since context clarifies what the *hevel* is.

1:9–10 When Ecclesiastes says that there is nothing new under the sun, it means that there is nothing that changes the fundamental facts of the human condition. This does not deny that there are technological innovations or new works of art, literature, and architecture, but these things are all

variations on what had already existed; they do not deliver humanity from its bondage to death. The “new thing” that really changes life can only come from God (Jr 31:31–34; Lk 22:20; Heb 9:15).

1:11 This verse does not claim that no human is ever remembered in history. The point is that people move on and that fame and glory have no lasting significance.⁴

References

1. [bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-42887063](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-suffolk-42887063)
2. Miles Custis and James S. Reitman, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Lexham Press, 2016).
3. Duane A. Garrett, “Ecclesiastes,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
4. Ibid.