

Ecclesiastes 1

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 | 2 |
| Solomon's Personal Quest for the Meaning of Life..... | 10 |
| Ecclesiastes 1:12-15 | 10 |
| Ecclesiastes 1:16-18 | 15 |
| Works Cited..... | 20 |

Introduction

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Limits of the Text

Ecclesiastes begins with a fairly typical title (1:1) and an introductory statement which previews the book (1:2). At this point, opinions differ as to whether 1:3-11 is part of the introduction or not. Solomon shifted to the first person in 1:12 as he began to detail the things he pursued in life; this seems to be the start of a new section of the book, thus I believe that 1:3-11 functions as an extension of 1:2, elaborating further upon his preview of the book.

Text

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Futile! Futile!" laments the Teacher, "Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!" What benefit do people get from all the effort which they expend on earth? A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth remains the same through the ages. The sun rises and the sun sets; it hurries away to a place from which it rises again. The wind goes to the south and circles around to the north; round and round the wind goes and on its rounds it returns. All the streams flow into the sea, but the sea is not full, and to the place where the streams flow, there they will flow again. All this monotony is tiresome; no one can bear to describe it: The eye is never satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear ever content with hearing. What exists now is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing truly new on earth. Is there anything about which someone can say, "Look at this! It is new!?" It was already done long ago, before our time. No one remembers the former events, nor will anyone remember the events that are yet to happen; they will not be remembered by the future generations.¹

Interpretation

1:1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem:

This is the title of the book. As discussed in the introduction, the book title "Ecclesiastes" probably means teacher, so these are the words of a teacher, specifically a teacher who is the son of David and a king in Jerusalem. In 1:12 he

¹ All quotes from The NET Bible unless otherwise specified.

is further specified as a teacher who is king over Israel in Jerusalem. This is most likely King Solomon. The fact that he identified himself as a teacher, not a king, probably indicates that he was offering wisdom and advice rather than issuing royal decrees and commands..

1:2 “Futile! Futile!” laments the Teacher, “Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!”

This is Solomon’s introductory statement, a preview of what he’s going to be teaching on. In a real way, this is a summary of most of Solomon’s life. Solomon began his reign in the most auspicious manner. He was the son of a king who was a man after God’s own heart (2 Sa 5:14). He was raised in the royal palace. He was hand-picked by his father to be his successor (1 Ki 1:30). He was charged by his father to build the temple and observe all the commands of God (1 Chr 28:2-10). God offered him anything he wanted—the only person to whom God has ever said, “Name it and claim it!”—and he chose wisdom and thus got everything else (2 Chr 1:7-12). He built the temple, and when he consecrated it fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifices, and God’s splendor filled the temple (2 Chr 7:1-3). Wisdom, riches, honor, power, health, fame—what a start to his reign!

How did Solomon go from “I have everything” to “everything is futile!”? It began when Solomon formed a political alliance with Egypt, and to seal the deal he married a daughter of Pharaoh (1 Ki 3:1); the law forbid such a marriage. Further, when the people of Israel sacrificed to idols, Solomon did as well (1 Ki 3:2-3). Even worse, Solomon loved many foreign women, not just Pharaoh’s daughter, Canaanite women with whom the Israelites were forbidden to intermarry. Eventually he accumulated a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines, and together these women turned his heart away from God to serve idols and even to build places to worship them (1 Ki 11:1-8).

Perhaps like no other person in all of history, Solomon had the means to pursue any and every type of pleasure he could imagine; he was the smartest, richest, most powerful man in the world. So he tried everything: hard work, achievement, wisdom and knowledge, materialism, self-indulgence, and sensual delight. Having tried it all, Solomon realized that none of it fulfilled him. “There is only one thing that never gets boring: God...When a man ceases to worship God he does not worship *nothing*, he worships *anything*, and, as Solomon would

add, he finds nothing worthy of his worship."² And so he summarized his experiences with "Futile! Futile! Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!"

But if "everything is futile" summarized the latter part of Solomon's life, it's not a complete summary of this book. In his old age Solomon repented of his sins and re-established his relationship with God, who then led him to write Ecclesiastes. Now Solomon was in a position to boldly assert that everything in life is futile, only if that life is lived apart from God.

The basic meaning of futile (the Hebrew transliteration is *hebel*) is wind or breath, but it has a wide semantic range of metaphoric extensions which are demonstrated throughout this book. Approximately half of its uses in the Old Testament are found in Ecclesiastes. The typical meaning of *hebel* in this book is meaninglessness, emptiness, or uselessness.³ (Although the NASB, ESV, and NKJV still use "vanity," this word is somewhat problematic because in modern English it can connote self-pride, a meaning that is not in view in this text.⁴) For example in 2:1 Solomon wrote, "I thought to myself, 'Come now, I will try self-indulgent pleasure to see if it is worthwhile.' But I found that it also is futile." See also 2:17. There are times, however, when Solomon used *hebel* to mean brevity or transience. For example in 11:10 he wrote, "Youth and the prime of life are fleeting." See also 6:12. Other times, *hebel* has the idea of something that is difficult to grasp or hard to understand. The NET Bible translates this idea as enigma. For example in 8:10 it says, "Not only that, but I have seen the wicked approaching and entering the temple, and as they left the holy temple, they boasted in the city that they had done so. This also is an enigma." See also 8:14. So all of these meanings are found in Ecclesiastes, and the context will determine which is appropriate.⁵

The word *hebel* is used five times in 1:2 to emphasize Solomon's point. Although it appears to be used only four times, the words "absolutely futile" are literally "futile of futilities," which is an emphatic construction with the idea of the most possible. This is the same construction seen in phrases like Holy of Holies (the

² Young, 11.

³ Swanson, DBLH 2039.

⁴ Longman, 61.

⁵ Solomon used this one Hebrew word, *hebel*, to tie his book together. On the one hand it would be good to consistently translate it as the same English word to reinforce the unity of the book. On the other hand translating it consistently would obscure the meaning of the text in many places. This is one of the many dilemmas for translators. In this book, I think it is probably better to translate it into multiple English words and bring out the correct meaning. From my cursory investigation, it seems that the NET Bible does the best job of translating *hebel* into the correct meaning.

most Holy place) and Song of Songs (the best Song possible). So the meaning is “the most possible futility,” which the NET captures well as “absolutely futile.” Like a blast of cold air, Solomon wanted to make sure his readers were immediately confronted with the absolute certainty of how futile life is apart from God.⁶

How do we know that when Solomon said “everything is futile” he didn’t mean exactly that? Is it really fair to add “apart from God” to the end of the sentence? I have three answers to this question. First, if Solomon really meant everything is futile and without meaning, then that includes his own assertion, and thus his statement is logically self-defeating. Second, you have to read the entire book. Chapter 1-11 must be interpreted in light of his concluding statements in chapter 12, especially 12:13-14. Third, futility is not the message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is God’s plan of redemption through Jesus, and this is a message of hope and promise, not futility and meaninglessness.

Having made his introductory statement, Solomon provided four proofs in 1:3-11 that his statement was true.

[1:3 What benefit do people get from all the effort which they expend on earth?](#)

Proof #1: Life is a profitless (or a zero-sum-gain). Solomon asked a rhetorical question which anticipated a negative answer. Life requires a lot of effort, but no, it clearly does not produce any ultimate benefit. There’s a word play in this verse not captured in most English translations, a noun and a verb from the same root word. It could be translated: “all the toil which they toil”⁷ or “all the labor which they labor.”⁸ Effort has the idea of hard, difficult labor that may or may not result in a gain or wealth;⁹ the word has a negative connotation and could be translated drudgery, toil, or even misery.¹⁰

Illustration: Been to the gym lately? Mainly of the workout machines there illustrate Solomon’s observation. Consider treadmills, stationary bikes, and stair-steppers. All of them are designed to consume as much energy as possible without actually taking you anywhere. This is difficult labor that may or may

⁶ Note that a nearly identical verse begins the conclusion of the book (12:8).

⁷ So ESV.

⁸ So YLT.

⁹ Swanson, DBLH 6662.

¹⁰ Longman, 65.

not result in a gain. Certainly you finish in exactly the same location you started.¹¹

No doubt Solomon had observed many farmers at work, and he had seen the results of the Fall firsthand. “Cursed is the ground thanks to you; in painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, but you will eat the grain of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat food until you return to the ground” (Ge 3:17-19, NET). The word benefit could be translated as advantage, gain, or profit;¹² there’s a financial investment feel to this word. In the end we wind up in exactly the same spot as when we were born. Job said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there. The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away. May the name of the LORD be blessed!” (Job 1:21). Since we can’t take it with us (5:15-16), we don’t get any benefit for our work. It’s as if our investments have not paid off.

Illustration: I have some money invested in Fidelity’s Magellan mutual fund. The fund wasn’t doing so well, so in Oct 2005 Fidelity hired Harry Lange to be the new fund manager. After six months on the job, the fund was worse off.¹³ This sort of experience is exactly the idea behind Solomon’s question.

Solomon limited the scope of this rhetorical question with the phrase “on earth” (most translations: under the sun). When he used this phrase, it meant he was limited his viewpoint to what man sees and knows; he was not considering things from God’s viewpoint. Herbert Leupold paraphrased Solomon’s meaning like this: “Let us for the sake of argument momentarily rule out the higher things.”¹⁴ Solomon was not saying that there is absolutely no benefit in life whatever, but he was saying that from a life-without-God perspective, there’s no benefit to hard work in life.

1:4 A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth remains the same through the ages. **1:5** The sun rises and the sun sets; it hurries away to a place from which it rises again. **1:6** The wind goes to the south and circles around to the north; round and round the wind goes and on its rounds it returns. **1:7** All the streams flow into the sea, but the sea is not full, and to the place where the streams flow, there they will flow again. **1:8** All this monotony is tiresome; no

¹¹ Young, 21.

¹² Harris, 420.

¹³ http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/11/13/8393162/index.htm.

¹⁴ Quoted in Longman, 66.

one can bear to describe it: The eye is never satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear ever content with hearing.

Proof #2: Life is unimpactful. What has Solomon observed? He has observed a contrast: People come and go, but the earth never changes. “Jerome stated the irony of the verse: ‘What is more vain than this vanity: that the earth, which was made for humans, stays—but humans themselves, the lords of the earth, suddenly dissolve into the dust?’”¹⁵ People, made in the image of God, come and go, but nature is unchanging in its repetitiveness. It goes on and on. The verbs in this section emphasize continual, uninterrupted action.¹⁶ Solomon gave three examples, the sun, the wind, and the water. Note that the illustration of the water probably does not have the water cycle in mind (contra the forced translation of the NIV and NKJV¹⁷). The point is probably that despite the perpetual flow of water, it doesn’t fill up; the Jordan River continually flowed into the Dead Sea, yet it was never full. This idea leads nicely into 1:8.

So what was Solomon’s conclusion from all this work? There was no impact. There was no change. People have an innate desire to make an impact in their world, but in the grand scheme of things, we don’t make any real difference.

Illustration: Man’s life is like footprints made in the sand at a beach; eventually they will be wiped out by wind and wave. Man’s life is like a gerbil on a wheel; he doesn’t actually get anywhere.

What was the result of his conclusion? 1:8 is a very difficult verse to translate and to understand. There are (at least) a couple different options, though both lead to a similar conclusion. The first idea is that when Solomon considered the monotonous, repetitive nature of the world, he observed how worn out and tired the world was from all its work. This idea is primarily supported by a very literal translation of the first clause: All things are weary. An echo of this type of thinking is found in Ro 8:20-22, where Paul wrote that creation itself, which groans and suffers pain, will be set free from the bondage of decay. The second idea is that when Solomon considered the monotonous, repetitive nature of the world, he was worn out and tired. In either case, he stated that it was impossible for a person—even a person full of wisdom like Solomon—to describe the world completely. There will always be more to see and more to hear. Like a sea that is never filled, so the eyes and ears will never be able to take it all in.

¹⁵ Jerome as quoted in Longman, 67.

¹⁶ The NET Bible, Ecc 1:4-7.

¹⁷ Garrett, 285.

Illustration: How many channels can you get if you had cable and satellite TV? How many radio stations can you get if you lived in a major US city (FM and AM) and you had XM radio? How many websites are there on the internet where you could learn stuff? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions? Far more information than you ever consume, much less understand, even if you never left your house for an entire lifetime.

1:9 What exists now is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing truly new on earth. **1:10** Is there anything about which someone can say, "Look at this! It is new!?" It was already done long ago, before our time.

Proof #3: Life is unoriginal. Maybe Adam and Eve did cool, unoriginal things, but for us, there is nothing ultimately new in our accomplishments. There will always be someone before us who can say, "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt." Sure, science and technology has changed our world, but "people continue their endless quest for fame, power, and happiness even as they move steadily toward death."¹⁸ The more things change, the more they stay the same. "The packaging of these things is certainly different today—cars instead of chariots—but the quest is basically the same."¹⁹

Illustration: "After the Dallas Cowboys won the Super Bowl in 1972, Tom Brookshire, a famous American broadcaster, asked Dwayne Thomas, a star of the game, 'What does it feel like to win the ultimate game?' Thomas declared, 'If it's the ultimate game, why is it being played again next year?'"²⁰

1:11 No one remembers the former events, nor will anyone remember the events that are yet to happen; they will not be remembered by the future generations.

Proof #4: Life is forgettable. Solomon employs a merism²¹ here; former events and future events stand for all events of a lifetime, past, present, and future. Nothing I do will be remembered. This is the antithesis of "It's a Wonderful Life." The vast, vast majority of us are destined to live and die in total obscurity. We will have little to no impact on the world at large, thus we will be forgotten quickly. No one will make a documentary of us, build a museum for us, or write

¹⁸ Garrett, 288.

¹⁹ Moore, 17.

²⁰ Moore, 17.

²¹ A merism is the use of two polar opposites to represent everything in between.

a biography about us. And even those who do achieve lasting fame gain nothing by it.²²

Illustration: Have you noticed that the average person has his name in the twice during his life? When he's born, and when he dies.²³

And thus Solomon has made his case: Life in and of itself is futile; apart from God, there is no meaning. Augustine said, "He who has God has everything. He who does not have God has nothing. He who has God and everything has no more than he who has God alone."²⁴

Gospel

This text clearly shows mankind's need for the gospel. If life is futile, if it's a profitless, if it's unimpactful, if it's unoriginal, and if it's forgettable, then life is not really worth living. No wonder so many people slip into despair and depression and commit suicide. In a world like this, mankind needs the gospel, we need to know a God who brings hope and joy and contentment and meaning to life. Listen to the contrast with Paul: "I now regard all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things" (Php 3:8, NET).

Textual Outline

1. Title (1:1)
2. Introductory statement: Everything is futile (1:2).
3. Proofs of statement
 - a. Life is profitless (1:3).
 - b. Life is unimpactful (1:4-8).
 - c. Life is unoriginal (1:9-10).
 - d. Life is forgettable (1:11).

²² Garrett, 288.

²³ Young, 23.

²⁴ Quoted in Young, 26.

Solomon's Personal Quest for the Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:12-15

Limits of the Text

In these verses Solomon examined the accomplishments of man.

Text

I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I decided to carefully and thoroughly examine all that has been accomplished on earth. I concluded: God has given people a burdensome task that keeps them occupied. I reflected on everything that is accomplished by man on earth, and I concluded: Everything he has accomplished is futile – like chasing the wind! What is bent cannot be straightened, and what is missing cannot be supplied.

Interpretation

In 1:2 Solomon gave an introductory statement which served as a preview of his teaching: Everything is futile. In this section of the book (1:12-2:26), Solomon related the various aspects of life that he had personally studied and/or attempted in his quest for the meaning of life. The first aspect of life that Solomon examined was the accomplishments of man, the works done under the sun.

1:12 I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Because he was relating his personal experiences, Solomon wrote in the first person. He was writing as a teacher, offering wisdom and advice, but he also noted that has been the king over Israel.²⁵

As noted in the introduction, the verb in this verse is in the perfect tense and has historically been translated "I was king";²⁶ however, more recent studies of Hebrew have revealed that it can have the force of "have been and still is,"²⁷ thus most modern translations translate this verb as "I have been king."²⁸ Although

²⁵ See the introduction for a discussion of the authorship of the book.

²⁶ So NKJV and NIV.

²⁷ Longman, 76.

²⁸ So NASB95, NET, HCSB, and ESV.

some have said this verb argues that Solomon was not the author of the book, this is not a strong argument.

Why does Solomon note that he was king? Did being king give him a unique vantage point for observing the accomplishments of man? He had more time than most people and far more resources, not to mention his God-given wisdom. If anyone had the resources required to figure out something difficult, it would have been Solomon.

1:13 I decided to carefully and thoroughly examine all that has been accomplished on earth. I concluded: God has given people a burdensome task that keeps them occupied.

Solomon's examination was not casual or cursory. He described his examination using two synonymous infinitives, to seek and to explore. The NET Bible understands these to be a verbal henidays,²⁹ which is probably why its translators combined these two infinitives into one, to examine. The first infinitive has the idea of searching and inquiring in order to learn information that was not previously known.³⁰ This verb was used of Ezra, who dedicated himself to study the law of the Lord (Ez 7:10), and the Egyptians, who sought guidance from their idols (Is 19:3). It may involve "investigating a matter by examining the physical evidence and interviewing eye-witnesses;"³¹ when a Jewish person was accused of violating the Mosaic law, the matter was to be investigated carefully (Dt 13:5; 17:4). The second infinitive has the idea of exploration. More than half of the uses of this verb in the Old Testament are of Israel when they spied out the land of Canaan in preparation for conquest (Num 13:2). Solomon probably used this verb in a more figurative manner with the idea of "careful examination"³² (2:3; 7:25).

For reasons I don't understand, the NET Bible has dropped the prepositional phrase "by wisdom." Other translations retain it, such as the NASB95 ("I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom") and the HCSB ("I applied my mind to seek and explore through wisdom"). This prepositional phrase acts as an adverb, describing how Solomon conducted his examination; it could even be

²⁹ A verbal henidays is "the use of two synonymous verbs to state a common idea in an emphatic manner." The NET Bible, Ecc 1:13.

³⁰ Swanson, DBLH 2011.

³¹ The NET Bible, Ecc 1:13.

³² Harris, 967.

translated “to search and to explore wisely.”³³ Solomon’s God-given wisdom (2 Chr 1:7-12) characterized his examination; that is, he examined with a God-centered point-of-view.

The object of Solomon’s examination was all that has been accomplished on the earth, everything done under heaven and under the sun (1:14). The verb accomplished is used widely (2642 times) and broadly in the Old Testament. It is used of obeying God’s commands (Lv 19:37), of building the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:10), and of God creating the world (Ge 1:7, 16, 25, 26). Solomon used it to encompass everything that man has made and done.

After examining everything that man has accomplished, Solomon arrived at two conclusions. Solomon’s first conclusion was that God has given man a burdensome task. God has given man an occupation, a “job that requires expenditure of considerable energy.”³⁴ And it is an occupation that keeps him occupied, a task that keeps him busy; there is an intentional redundancy for emphasis. Furthermore, it is a burdensome task. The root of this word is evil or bad, but it has a variety of nuances. Since this task is attributed to God (Ec 3:10), evil or bad in a moral sense is not a possible translation. Harris notes the word can have the sense of being “detrimental in terms of its effects on man. In some instances it may refer only to its injurious effects on man, either as physical or emotional harm to the person or as painfully unpleasant experiences.”³⁵ English translations vary here—grievous (NASB95), miserable (HCSB), unhappy (ESV)—as they try to capture the sense of this word. I think this verse refers to the work done under the sun back in 1:3, which ultimately looks back to the Fall in the garden. Work takes energy, work keeps man busy, and work is a burden. Whether it was farming crops and tending sheep in Solomon’s day or programming computers and teaching children today, the God-given tasks of mankind are burdensome. Work takes effort, work keeps people busy, and work is often not that pleasant. But Solomon’s focus in this verse is not so much the nature of the task nor the result of the task, but the source of the task: It was God-given. God set all this in motion. “I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves” (Ec 3:10, NASB95). Working is the nature of the world. When Adam sinned in the garden, everything became difficult. God said, “Because you obeyed your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ cursed is the ground thanks to you; in painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your

³³ Longman, 77.

³⁴ Swanson, DBLH 6721.

³⁵ Harris, 854.

life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, but you will eat the grain of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat food until you return to the ground” (Ge 3:17-19a).

1:14 I reflected on everything that is accomplished by man on earth, and I concluded: Everything he has accomplished is futile – like chasing the wind!

Solomon’s second conclusion was that accomplishments are futile. Here’s the word *hebel* again (see the discussion at 1:2), and it has the typical meaning of meaningless or useless. All of man’s accomplishments are futile. In this verse Solomon’s focus was more on the result of the task: futility. It’s like chasing after the wind.

What does it mean to chase the wind? You can’t catch the wind; but even if you could catch it, you still wouldn’t have anything.³⁶ It’s a picturesque way of saying that something is futile, that meaning can’t be found apart from God.

Mankind is no longer in the garden; now he has to work hard to live. His accomplishments, the fruits of his labor, are futile. Many people have a tendency not just to work, but to pursue meaning in their work. We often call this type of person a workaholic; it may be an athlete who practices longer and harder than anyone, a husband who works late to get that next promotion, or politician who is always stumping for votes to keep his position. But no matter how hard a man works, no matter what he accomplishes, work is meaningless apart from God. There is hope and meaning and purpose in life, but it can’t be found in accomplishments alone.

1:15 What is bent cannot be straightened, and what is missing cannot be supplied.

This sentence sounds a bit odd and out of place until one realizes it’s a proverb, a bit of poetry inserted into the prose, though it should not really surprise us that Solomon would inject proverbs into his writing. Longman identifies this as a proverb by noting that it has two characteristics common in proverbs. First, it has a parallel structure, and second, it has a slightly enigmatic character, being both pithy and thought provoking.³⁷ The same is true of the proverb in 1:18.

³⁶ Garrett, 289.

³⁷ Longman, 82.

How does this proverb function? It seems to summarize Solomon's point. It gives the sense that this is the way things are, and that man cannot change them no matter how much he accomplishes. It is a burdensome task and a futile task because it is God-given task. Note the parallel in 7:13: "Consider the work of God: For who can make straight what he has bent?" Whatever is bent is bent because God bent it; whatever is missing is missing because God did not supply it. This is reality, and "refusing to accept reality can only result in unhappiness and weariness."³⁸

Gospel

This text warns us that we tend to seek for satisfaction in our accomplishments. Whether it's as big as making vice president in our company or as small checking off everything on our "to do" list today, whether it's finally getting that diploma or finally making the baseball team, we tend to seek contentment and peace and joy in what we get done. Solomon reminds us in this text that no accomplishment, no matter how remarkable it is, will truly satisfy us. Only knowing and loving the Savior will bring us meaning and purpose in life.

Textual Outline

1. Work is God-given (1:12-13a).
2. Work is a burden (1:13b)
3. Work is futile (1:14-16).

³⁸ Provan, 70.

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Limits of the Text

In these verses Solomon examined the value of secular wisdom and knowledge.

Text

I thought to myself, "I have become much wiser than any of my predecessors who ruled over Jerusalem; I have acquired much wisdom and knowledge." So I decided to discern the benefit of wisdom and knowledge over foolish behavior and ideas; however, I concluded that even this endeavor is like trying to chase the wind! For with great wisdom comes great frustration; whoever increases his knowledge merely increases his heartache.

Interpretation

In 1:2 Solomon gave an introductory statement which served as a preview of his teaching: Everything is futile. In this section of the book (1:12-2:26), Solomon related the various aspects of life that he had personally studied and/or attempted in his quest for the meaning of life. The second aspect of life that Solomon examined was education and learning.

1:16 I thought to myself, "I have become much wiser than any of my predecessors who ruled over Jerusalem; I have acquired much wisdom and knowledge."

As he considered his life to this point, Solomon asserted that he had acquired much wisdom and knowledge, more than any previous ruler in Jerusalem. Solomon used two synonymous verbs to describe how wise he had become, "to make great" and "to increase." Much like the infinitives in 1:13, the NET Bible understands these to be a verbal hendiadys, which is probably why its translators combined these into one verb, "I have become much wiser." (Longman notes that Solomon had a love for using two nearly synonymous terms together.³⁹)

Wisdom is a broad word. "Wisdom is seen in the skill of technical work in making garments for the high priest (Ex 28:3), craftsmanship in metal work (Ex 31:3, 6), as well as the execution of battle tactics (Isa 10:13). Wisdom is required

³⁹ Longman, 83.

from government leaders and heads of state for administration (Deut 34:9; II Sam 14:20), including pagan leaders as well as Israelites (Ezk 28:4–5).⁴⁰ Wisdom comes from God (Pr 2:6), whose guidance is required to live a moral, ethical, and spiritual life.

Knowledge is also a broad word. The Hebrew word used here is “a general term for knowledge, particularly that which is of a personal, experimental nature (Prov 24:5). It is also used for technical knowledge or ability such as that needed for building the tabernacle and temple (Ex 31:3; 35:31; I Kgs 7:14)...[It] is the contemplative perception of the wise man.”⁴¹

The Bible supports Solomon’s assertion. When he first ascended the throne, he asked God for a discerning mind, and God granted his request (1 Ki 3:9,12). “God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment; the breadth of his understanding was as infinite as the sand on the seashore. Solomon was wiser than all the men of the east and all the sages of Egypt. He was wiser than any man, including Ethan the Ezrahite or Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol. He was famous in all the neighboring nations. He composed 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. He produced manuals on botany, describing every kind of plant, from the cedars of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows on walls. He also produced manuals on biology, describing animals, birds, insects, and fish. People from all nations came to hear Solomon’s display of wisdom; they came from all the kings of the earth who heard about his wisdom” (1 Ki 4:29-34, NET). Notice the breath of his wisdom, how it included even the arts and the sciences.

As noted in the introduction, the phrase “of my predecessors who ruled over Jerusalem” has caused some to believe that Solomon could not be the author of Ecclesiastes, since he only had one predecessor, his father David. It’s possible, however, that Solomon was simply referring to the Jebusite kings who ruled Jerusalem before David conquered it.

Why did Solomon compare himself to his predecessors? Why does he put such emphasis on his wisdom and knowledge? “The point is, if he cannot find meaning in or through wisdom, then who can?...If Solomon could not find happiness in his wisdom...then no one can.”⁴²

[1:17 So I decided to discern the benefit of wisdom and knowledge over foolish](#)

⁴⁰ Harris, 283.

⁴¹ Harris, 366-7.

⁴² Longman, 83.

behavior and ideas; however, I concluded that even this endeavor is like trying to chase the wind!

The NET translators take some liberties in their translation of this verse. Neither “benefit” nor “over” appear in the Hebrew text; both are supplied for clarity.⁴³ The translators *assume* that Solomon set out to prove that wisdom is better than folly; but this is not what the Hebrew text says, and that is not the only possible way to understand this verse. It is true that Solomon later wrote that wisdom is preferably to folly (2:13), but in this verse it merely says that Solomon set out to study both of them. A more literal, and I believe a more accurate, translation is found in the HCSB: “I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly.” I will follow this more literal translation in my study of this verse.

In 1:13 Solomon decided “to examine;” here he decided “to know.” Know is the verb from which the noun knowledge derives. “This root...expresses a multitude of shades of knowledge gained by the senses...While ordinarily gained by experience, knowledge is also the contemplative perception possessed by the wise man” (Prov 1:4; 2:6; 5:2; Eccl 1:18).⁴⁴ So Solomon decided to comprehend more about wisdom and knowledge, and he also decided to comprehend madness and folly.

Madness refers to “an extreme lack of understanding and wisdom, so, folly or foolish behavior (Ecc 1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 9:3+); note: to a wise man this is the erratic behavior that mimics madness.”⁴⁵ “This root stresses the irrational aspect of insanity...most instances [of this noun] exhibit an application to irrational thought processes.”⁴⁶

Folly is “that which lacks prudence, wisdom, and insight, showing a lack of understanding;”⁴⁷ it is “the way of a man with twisted values.”⁴⁸ Folly is derived from a verb that “usually expresses lack in a moral or spiritual sense. Thus Saul acted as a fool when he usurped the Levitical prerogative in offering sacrifices. There is more involved than simply being an intellectual fool—Saul displayed his utter lack of spiritual comprehension...The verb is mostly used in contexts

⁴³ The NET Bible, Ecc 1:17.

⁴⁴ Harris, 366.

⁴⁵ Swanson, DBLH 2099.

⁴⁶ Harris, 219

⁴⁷ Swanson, DBLH 6121.

⁴⁸ Harris, 625.

where a man acts out of fear and thus behaves rashly, rather than acting wisely out of a confidence based in God."⁴⁹

Note that Solomon did not attempt to do everything advocated by what he studied (at least not just yet, see 2:1-3); he merely studied them, attempting to discern their usefulness in finding purpose and meaning in life. This was a secular pursuit, one still under the sun. "The wisdom Solomon is talking about in context is not the wisdom of God and His word; it is wisdom derived from exploring human knowledge—philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, history, logic, and rhetoric—the best ideas that man has invented or discovered."⁵⁰ And he also studied the worst that man has to offer. I think it would like getting a classical education today, studying the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates on the one hand (the best that man has to offer), and Nietzsche, Hitler, and Stalin on the other (the worst that man has to offer).

Solomon's conclusion was that secular wisdom and knowledge, including madness and folly, are also like chasing after the wind. Meaning in life cannot be found by studying the best or worst human thinkers. "Meaning for life must come from something outside of ourselves."⁵¹

1:18 For with great wisdom comes great frustration; whoever increases his knowledge merely increases his heartache.

Similar to the previous section, Solomon concluded with a proverb (1:15). How does this proverb function? It summarized the result of Solomon's endeavor. What happened after he studied wisdom and knowledge (and madness and folly as well)? He found no meaning or purpose for life in them. The more he knew, the less helpful it was, and ultimately the more frustrated he became. "The more our knowledge grows, the more despondent modern society seems to become because it cannot find any ultimate or lasting answers."⁵²

Gospel

In our culture we place great emphasis upon education. Knowledge is power! This text warns us that we tend to seek for satisfaction in what we learn and know. We tend to think that if we could become the company expert in this area

⁴⁹ Harris, 624.

⁵⁰ Nelson, 24.

⁵¹ Nelson, 24.

⁵² Moore, 18.

of study, get a PhD so we could teach others, or know a ton of trivial about some sports team so we can carry the conversation with our friends, then other people would be amazed by us and respect us, and then we would find contentment and happiness in life. Solomon reminds us in this text that no amount of learning will truly satisfy us. Even if we could study all the great philosophers and philosophies and know them well, we would not find anything that could help us find meaning and purpose in life. Purpose in life comes only from doing what we were designed to do, which is worshipping and serving God, and we can only worship God when we believe the gospel and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Textual Outline

1. Secular wisdom is futile (16-17).
2. Secular wisdom is frustrating (18).

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