

The King's Classroom: Studies in the Book of Ecclesiastes

LESSON # 1 – EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:26

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I. VIDEO – Ecclesiastes 2 (www.godtube.com).

II. Introduction

A. His Hebrew name is *Qoheleth*, his Greek name, *Ecclesiastes*.

1. It means “one who assembles.”
 - a. But what does he assemble?
 - b. Perhaps congregants, which is why some translations refer to him as “the Preacher.”
 - c. But it is more likely that he assembles observations and insights, sayings and words about wisdom, and students with whom to share them. This is why the NIV calls him “the Teacher” (1:1).
2. He describes himself as “**a son of David, King in Jerusalem**” (1:1).
 - a. He tells of his unsurpassed wisdom (1:16), his unparalleled works (2:5-7), his unequalled wealth (2:7-8), and his unenviable collection of women (2:8).
 - b. Traditionally he has been identified as Solomon, because who had greater wisdom, works, wealth and women than Solomon?
 - c. But the Teacher of this class is almost certainly not Solomon.
 - 1). The Teacher speaks of his rule in the past tense. Solomon was king until the day he died (1:12).
 - 2). The Teacher mentions all those who ruled in Jerusalem before him. Only two kings preceded Solomon to the throne (1:16)
 - 3). The Teacher abandons the image of kingship only a few pages into his notes, at which point he takes a particularly critical tone toward the king (4:13-16; 5:8-9; 8:2-4; 10:4-7; 10:16).

4). Whoever the Teacher is, he adopts a kingly, perhaps even Solomonic persona in order to teach his students the lesson they must learn.

B. His lesson is hard to hear.

1. It begins and ends the same way – 1:2 and 12:8:

“Hevel hevelaim!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly hevel!
Everything is hevel.”

2. *Hevel*.

a. The word appears some seventy times in the Old Testament, thirty-seven times in the Teacher’s notes alone.

b. The NIV translates the word consistently as “meaningless.” But there’s much more to the word than that.

c. In the Teacher’s classroom the word carries two main ideas:

1). That which is without substance, and that which is not lasting.

2). Blow your hot air in the cold, dark night, and you will understand *hevel*. It is a breath, a vapor, a puff of smoke; it cannot be grasped, and it does not last.

3). *Hevel* was the name of the second son born to Adam and Eve, a son whose life was as short-lived as a vapor.

C. Yes, his lesson is hard to hear, but his instruction is not without purpose.

1. “What could possibly be gained,” you ask, “with the understanding that life is short and seriously lacking in substance?”

2. What is gained, my friends, is a proper perspective about life. When one understands life, one knows how to live it.

3. This is the great contribution of this Teacher. He understands life.

a. He knows all that can be known. He’s seen all that can be seen. He’s experienced all that can be experienced.

- b. And he passes on the wisdom he's gained on to his students.
- c. Lesson #1 – Everything Is Meaningless.

III. Everything Is Meaningless

A. In the first lesson, the Teacher documents an experiment that he conducts in an attempt to discover the true meaning of life.

B. He studies three areas in which human beings strive to find satisfaction – work, education, and pleasure.

C. First he studies WORK.

1. “What does a man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun” (1:3)? In other words, is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life spent at work?

2. Ecclesiastes 1:4-11: “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;

round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

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

Is there anything of which one can say,
‘Look! This is something new’?

It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.”

3. In these verses the Teacher describes the wearisome routine of work: He goes to work; he comes home from work. He goes to work; he comes home from work. He goes to work; he comes home from work. There is no end to his work.

4. The sun keeps rising and setting, and rising and setting, and rising and setting. The wind keeps blowing round and round and round in circles. The rivers keep flowing into the seas, but the seas are never filled.

a. The work is never finished.

b. The work is never remembered.

c. And the work is never lasting.

5. Ecclesiastes 2:17-23: “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.” ***Work is meaningless.***

D. Second he studies **EDUCATION.**

1. “I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (1:13). Is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life devoted to education?

2. Ecclesiastes 1:14-18: “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is twisted cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

I thought to myself, ‘Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.’ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

3. In these verses the Teacher introduces us to a phrase that is particular to his classroom: *“a chasing after the wind.”* The phrase is a graphic illustration of futility and meaninglessness.

4. One is never fully educated.

a. Some problems will never be solved.

b. Some pieces of the puzzle will always be missing.

c. And the fact of the matter is, “The wiser you are, the more worries you have; the more you know the more it hurts” (TEV).

5. *“What a heavy burden God has laid on men!”* Or, “What a lousy job!”
Education is meaningless.

E. Third he studies PLEASURE.

1. We listened to this passage a moment ago from 2:1-11. *“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure” (2:10)*. Is there anything in the profit column at the end of a life lived in pursuit of pleasure?

2. Surely meaning can be found in pleasure: in wine, works, wealth, and women.

3. The Teacher is like Prince Charles, Donald Trump, Bill Gates, and Hugh Hefner all rolled into one.

4. Who wouldn't be satisfied with this?

5. 2:11: *“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”*

Who knew? *Pleasure is meaningless.*

F. Everything is meaningless.

1. Living for work, education, and pleasure ends up in incredible disappointment.

2. What else is there to life?
3. The teacher looks again into education and work, thinking perhaps he has missed something somewhere. But no, it is all meaningless (2:17-20).

IV. Conclusion

- A. This lesson is hard for many of us to hear.
 1. It is hard because many of us – right here, right now – are giving our lives to these meaningless pursuits.
 2. We are pouring everything we are and everything we have into our careers, our colleges, and our extra-curricular activities.
 3. And what do we have to show for it? I'll tell you we have.
 - a. We have workaholics who sell their children to highest bidder, and then try to explain to the children how it's all about them.
 - b. We have academic snobs who are so wise they've actually become fools (Romans 1:22).
 - c. And we have a world full of addicts who have convinced themselves that all they need to arrive at happiness is another house, another car, another spouse, or another drink.
- B. Yes, the lesson is hard to hear, but it is not without purpose.
 1. We must learn from the teacher a proper perspective about life.
 2. We must come to understand life, so that we may understand how to live it.
 3. We must learn to differentiate between the meaningless and the meaningful.
- C. Notice the Teacher's conclusion to the first lesson:
 1. How, exactly, are we to spend our ephemeral and empty lives?
 2. 2:24-26: "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

2. My fellow students, life itself is the meaning.
3. Sprinkled throughout this book, in the midst of every one of the Teacher's lectures about the brevity and banality of life, he turns to show his students what is most important.
4. Seven passages present his statement of faith. They are known as the "joy passages," and they instruct us in the way to find meaning in life.
5. Here, where work, education, and pleasure fail us, the joy of living does not.
6. "There is nothing better, nothing more meaningful than this," the teacher says, "than to gather around a table with family and friends and to receive blessing, not pursue it."
7. The best things, the meaningful things in life, come as gifts from a beneficent God, not from our baseless pursuits.
8. Our best efforts will often fail, but God will not. James writes, "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:16-17)."
9. This morning, are you wasting your life in the pursuit of vain pleasures, or are you living life to the fullest, recognizing and receiving the true joys that only God can give?
10. At the beginning of this holiday season I encourage you to take the time to recognize what is truly important and give thanks, and stop building castles out of sand. Casting Crowns always says it much better than I can:

"American Dream"

*All work no play may have made Jack a dull boy
But all work no God has left Jack with a lost soul
But he's moving on full steam
He's chasing the American dream
And he's gonna give his family finer things*

*"Not this time son I've no time to waste
Maybe tomorrow we'll have time to play"
And then he slips into his new BMW
And drives farther and farther and farther away*

Cause he works all day and tries to sleep at night

*He says things will get better;
Better in time*

[Chorus]

*So he works and he builds with his own two hands
And he pours all he has in a castle made with sand
But the wind and the rain are comin' crashing in
Time will tell just how long his kingdom stands
His kingdom stands*