

**Ecclesiastes (Part 1)**  
Heart of Wisdom Series  
Coast School of Theology; Pastor Earl Miles; 2-17-19

Note: These notes are a compilation of insights from *The Bible Project* and the *ESV Study Bible* and other sources along with own input.

**A Tale Told By An Idiot? (1:1-11)**

*SEYTON*

The queen, my lord, is dead.

*MACBETH*

She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. – Shakespeare in *MacBeth*

**Wisdom Literature**

How can we live well in this world?

Proverbs is like the bright, young teacher who is convinced if you use wisdom you will be successful because life is not random; there is a clear cause and effect relationship between doing the right thing and being rewarded.

Ecclesiastes is like the sharp, middle-aged critic who challenges the notion that wisdom will bring you success because life is ‘meaningless’ (vanity).

**Two Voices in Ecclesiastes (1:1; 12:9)**

The voice of the Critic or ‘preacher’ and the voice of the Author or compiler.

The ‘Critic’ or preacher speaks in the bulk of the book. (1:3-12:7)

The ‘Author’ or compiler speaks at the beginning and end of the book. (1:1-2; 12:8-14)

‘Preacher’ is the Qohlet or Qoheleth: ‘someone who has gathered people together’ like a teacher or preacher.

- Some think this book is the work of Solomon. (1:1; 1:16; 2:7)
- Others think it is the work of another descendent of David.
- And others think it is the work of an Israelite who takes on the persona of Solomon.
- Ultimately, God is the Author. (12:11; Genesis 48:15; Psalm 23:1; 28:9; 80:1)

We have the ‘narrator’s quest’ to find satisfaction in life.

### **Three Disturbing Themes**

1. March of Time
2. All Going to Die
3. Life’s Random Nature

Opening Poem on Time (1:3-11)

1. Nothing really changes.
2. Even new technologies don’t make fundamental changes.
3. Time will eventually erase us and what we care about.

Closing Poem on Death (11:7-12:7)

1. Death is the great equalizer.
2. Death devours all no matter what we do.
3. Death is inescapable.

### **Glitch in the ‘Cause and Effect’ System (9:11)**

The glitch is ‘chance’ and the reality that you cannot master or control anything in life.

Things will likely go better with wisdom and the fear of the Lord but even these are ‘hevel’ (not meaningless but an enigma) in that they cannot guarantee what we want will happen (9:13-18).

Even wisdom does not always work the way we think it should.

### **The ‘Hevel’ Metaphor (1:2)**

Life is called ‘hevel’ or ‘hebel’ (vanity) (38 times) which means literally, smoke or vapor.

1. Life is temporary and fleeting
2. Life is an enigma or paradox

Life is like smoke that (1) looks solid but can't be grasped; (2) changes shape quickly and (3) can easily cloud our view of things.

Life is unpredictable, unstable; it is a world in which bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people.

The 'meaning' of life is often unclear when just seen on the surface.

Refers to the fleetingness of any human being's grasp of the full meaning of events. - ESV

Life is understood as 'vanity' or 'meaningless' either (1) apart from God and satisfaction in Him or (2) in terms of our ability to figure things out this side of heaven.

### **Search for Meaning (1:13)**

The 'preacher' explores all the various ways in which we try to give meaning to our lives but fail:

1. Wealth
2. Career
3. Social Status
4. Pleasure

The book targets all the ways we attempt to build meaning into our lives apart from God and end up investing our lives in these things with no lasting significance.

Life does have meaning but it is not apparent in how things play out.

### **Under the Sun (1:9)**

This phrase ('under the sun') is used many times (29 times) in Ecclesiastes and appears to refer to life on earth as viewed

1. In itself, at best.
2. Apart from God, at worst.
3. In either case, according to what is observable.

This is why for both believers and unbelievers, a good meal and a good wife should be an occasion of rejoicing.

This is why there is no mention of life after death per se or a resurrection, although there is the mention at the end of God's judgment which alludes to both.

Challenges:

- Alleged contradictions like 7:12 and 2:16 or 4:2 and 9:4-6.
- Apparent unorthodox statements like 7:16 or 2:16 versus Proverbs 3:18 or 11:9 versus Numbers 15:39.

It presents challenges because of:

- A provocative style.
- The general method of wisdom teaching (to state apparently contradictory principles and leave it to the listener to work out which principle applies in a particular situation)
- Its focus on examining unique individual situations rather than general truths (4:7-8; 5:13-14; 9:13-16; 4:13-16; 9:11)
- Awareness of the complexities of life in a fallen world which results in many exceptions to the 'rules' of Biblical wisdom. - ESV

### **Rules and Exceptions**

Proverbs: 'You reap what you sow.' (Galatians 6:7-9)

Ecclesiastes: 'You reap what you sow, but not necessarily in this fallen world.' (2 Timothy 4:14)