

Solomon - “Looking For Meaning In All The Wrong Places”



I. Background on Ecclesiastes: The “Journal” of Solomon’s Journey Away From God (taken from “Getting The Big Picture” course)

1. The opening verse of the book fits the description of _____ that we have from the book of 1 Kings.
2. The Hebrew word, (קהלת, Qoheleth), translated “_____” in our NIV Bibles, only _____ in this book, out of the entire Old Testament. (cf. 1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8-10)
3. In the _____ version of the Old Testament, a word is used to translate it (εκκλησιαστου, *ekklesiastou*), from which we get our _____ for the book, “Ecclesiastes.”
4. The word “_____,” God’s covenant name, appears over 6,800 times in the Old Testament, 87x in Proverbs, but *never* in Ecclesiastes. “_____” is used instead (41x). In a very real sense, Solomon is thinking more as a deist than a _____.
5. Unlike Proverbs, which was written for “anyman,” this book appears to have been written for the _____ elite. (cf. 8:2-3; 10:4).
6. The book of Ecclesiastes is the “_____” of King Solomon’s journey to find an answer to life’s most penetrating _____, “What’s the _____?”:
“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3, ESV)
7. Solomon tried to find _____ in life, “...under the sun” (in other words, without _____), by looking in all the _____ places:
“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” (2:11, ESV)

Solomon’s “Dead End Streets” on His Road to Happiness “Under the Sun”:

Reference	The “Street” He Traveled
2:15-16	wisdom – what he _____
2:19-21	work – what he could _____ “under the sun”
2:26	money – what he could _____ that others couldn’t
4:4	status – what others _____ of him
4:7-8	self-reliance – how little he needed _____
4:16	fame – how much he was _____ by others
5:10	possessions – what he _____ & what is “_____”
6:6	long life – prolonging the _____
6:7	partying – “forgetting” life’s _____, with others
6:9	passion/desire – doing what “_____ good”

8. Solomon finally realized that he could not separate _____ purposes for him from his own _____ for himself:

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” (12:13,14, ESV)

9. Solomon realized the truth of 2 Kings 17:15, that we become like what we _____:

“They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and went after the nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them.”

1. **(Background)** The author of Ecclesiastes (traditionally but *not* universally thought to be Solomon), wrote this book as sort of memoir as an old man (e.g. 1:16; 2:4-9,18; 7:15; 9:13-15; 10:5-7; 12:1). There is abundant evidence that the author had seen and done much over a long period of time.
2. **(Background)** Like it or not, this is a very philosophical book. It is really dealing with the most important question of all, *“What’s the point?”* All the tangible and identifiable topics in it (e.g. knowledge, pleasure, possessions, status, etc.) must be understood as attempted paths towards personal meaning. Solomon, in this book, is addressing the issue of what causes someone to keep going when life around them is falling apart and has no apparent and obvious meaning, and even their own heart is screaming “you fool!” for wanting to keep going. What is it, at the end of the day, that gives me a reason to seek to extend the time period between birth and death?
3. **(Q1)** The word, *“vanity”* (ESV, NAS), or *“meaningless”* (NIV) that appears 37x in this brief diary has as one of its meanings, *“vapor.”* It would probably be good to think of this referring to something lacking permanence, and/or fruitfulness. In other words, things that do not last, either in themselves or what they ultimately produce that outlives them. (This *may* have some modern application in our world of “virtual reality,” a digital “vaporous” culture).
4. **(Q1&2)** Many people are quick to think that the key word for this book is *“vanity”* (Heb *habel*) because it appears 37x. And even though *“vanity”* marks the conclusions of the author, by itself this word does *not* help us understand the path that brought him to this conclusion about life. The truth is, it was *not* the “path,” he followed, but rather his “starting point.” The actual interpretive key to this book is in the phrase that appears 29x, in every chapter except three (7,11,12). That phrase is *“under the sun.”* Solomon’s conclusions throughout this book are *not* depressing if you understand that are the inevitable consequences of an extremely intelligent and gifted individual who has dropped the idea of a personal God out of the equation (his use of Elohim instead of Yahweh is very significant). In this Bible study, Questions 1 and 2 have the phrase “apart from God” in them. This is referring to *“under the sun.”*
5. **(Q2b)** The answers to this question in your group will most likely be all over the board, depending upon the variety of personal faith journeys represented, and perhaps even the ages of your group members. Be prepared to hear diverse responses to this question, if you decide to pursue it. (The author of *To Walk and Not Grow Weary* followed a path very similar to Solomon’s, and came to the same conclusions about life “under the sun.”)
6. **(Q3 - 1:13)** The words “wisdom” and “knowledge” appear 7x in six verses. Solomon is speaking here (1:13-18) about amassing learning and trying to apply it to life as he sees it. In our age, this would probably translate into our words, “education” or “learning.” Because information itself has become a new form of garbage due to its volume and planned obsolescence, this “road” has many, many more branches today than it did in his. In our age of “data smog,” Paul’s statement, *“...always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth...”* (2 Tim 3:7) has special application.
7. **(Q3 - 2:3)** This is probably best understood in the context of socializing or partying because of his statement, *“my heart still guiding me with wisdom.”* His pursuit of pleasure in 2:1-11 seems to have followed two different paths: unbridled recklessness (2:10), and reasoned temperance.

8. **(Q4)** There is perhaps no better place to see Solomon’s folly presented as tempting truths than in the world of advertising over the years:
 - “Why Ask Why? Try Bud Dry”
 - “The Real Thing” (Coke)
 - “Thousands of Possibilities. Get Yours” (Best Buy)
 - “Where Do You Want to Go Today?” (Microsoft)
 - “A Diamond is Forever”
 - “Just Do It!” (Nike)
 - “VISA: It’s Everywhere You Want to Be!”
 - “Have it Your Way” (Burger King)
 - “The Happiest Place on Earth” (McDonalds)
 - “Be All You Can Be!” (Army)
 - “We Make Joy” (BMW)
9. **(Q4)** Solomon’s statement here, that we create our own meaning, is tempting. But, the sobering truth is that this is a *crushing* responsibility. We are not made to carry the enormous weight of personal meaning and purpose. When life becomes unbearably difficult, which it will at some point, our self-appointed “purpose” will collapse under the weight of difficulty life presents.
10. **(Q6-Hosea)** This is a very significant warning Yahweh gave his people in their *poverty*, to prepare them for the perils of prosperity (cf. Deut 8:11-18).
11. **(Q8)** This may not be immediately clear. What we are looking for in this question is seeing “happiness” (i.e. “blessedness”) as a *fruit* or by-product. It is something that comes from something else. This means that “happiness” can *not* be found by looking for it. It can only be “found” by seeking the thing that produces it:



“Stumbling Stones”

1. **(Q3)** It would be tempting to dismiss the power of Solomon’s conclusions by failing to recognize the parallels of what he did *in excess* to what we do in moderation, pursuing our fulfillment and meaning in things that can not by nature, provide it: family, marriage, friends, home, money, etc. We seem to quietly assume that what happened to him will never happen to us.
2. **(Q5)** The Isaiah passage is actually speaking of national Israel being God’s servant and witness, *not* an individual (i.e. me). However, the larger principle here finds more specific application in Jesus’ statements about obedience in the matrix of relationship with Yahweh. The point here, in contrast to Solomon’s autonomy, is submission to the will of God, i.e. finding *my* purposes in the context of His purposes.
3. **(Q6)** Be careful in discussing this and the American notion of God’s “blessing.” Too often, Christians make two crucial mistakes in this regard. The first is to *equate* prosperity with God’s “blessing.” This implies that the *absence* of prosperity is a sign of God’s curse, at worst, or simply the withholding of his blessing at best. The second error, and more serious, is failing to understand financial prosperity in the context of the *Abrahamic covenant*, not the Mosaic covenant. Physical prosperity was the promise of the Mosaic covenant outlined in Deuteronomy 28-30. But the NT teaches that the Mosaic covenant was set aside in Christ (Heb 8, 10; Gal 3). The Abrahamic covenant *is* the “Gospel” (Gal 3:7-9). Financial “blessing,” for believers, must be understood against the backdrop of *that* covenant. And there, we are “blessed” in order to bless others, *not* ourselves.

4. **(Q6-Hosea)** Be careful here *not* to equate our *need* for God as the proper motivation. While our needs do drive us to Him, and the lack of needs causes us to “forget” Him, the larger issues here are *who He is*, who I’m not, and the scandalous offer to have an intimate relationship with Him.



“Going Deeper”

1. **(Q2a)** Have group members share their responses to this question. **(NOTE:** The point here is that unless a “voice” from *outside* me with absolute authority to speaks meaning into my life, all *really is* “vanity.” Paul’s statement to the Corinthians has special application here: “*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.*” **1 Cor 15:16-19**
2. **(Q3 - 1:13)** “In his quest for learning, Solomon concluded, “...*he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*” What do you think he meant by this statement? How is this, in a sense, more true for us living today than it was for him?”
3. **(Q6-Timothy)** “Which do you think a person abandons first, her faith or her conscience?” Explain.
4. **(Q9)** “Is God’s will for you a plan or a person? Which is easier to identify and validate?” Explain.
5. **(Q10)** If the Spirit’s conviction *really is* like James 3:17, what would be the ‘good fruit’ that it is ‘full’ of?”