

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 | “All is Vanity?”

Preached on February 22, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles to the book of Ecclesiastes, as we are beginning a brand new sermon series today. *[pause]*

A helpful way to find Ecclesiastes is to first find Psalms and Proverbs, since they are easier to find, and you’ll find it right after Proverbs. *[pauseeee]*

We will be covering just Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 today, as I wanted to give an introductory sermon to this book.

And the reason is because this book *can be* difficult to understand if you don’t grasp what the author is doing. *[pauseee]*

It has some portions in it that *sound* like they contradict other passages in the Bible, so it’s vital to see what the author of Ecclesiastes is doing and why he says what he says. *[pauseeee]*

What we will find is that Ecclesiastes definitely doesn’t contradict other portions of the Bible, but it’s viewing things from a certain perspective or outlook. *[pauseeeee]*

There are different outlooks on life that people have. *[pause]*

You have *the optimist*, who continually expects positive outcomes.

This is the kind of person who is always hopeful and cheerful, expecting things to turn out well, even if things don’t look good at all. *[pause]*

Their heads are sometimes in the clouds, as they are naive to reality and often unrealistic in their expectations. *[pauseeee]*

The opposite extreme of the optimist is *the pessimist*.

This is the person who always sees the negative in things, and tends to imagine that the worst thing will happen. *[pause]*

You may have met a pessimist, if you have had the desire to say, “Why do you always have to be negative about everything!?”

And it’s like they can’t even fathom a bright spot in anything, but expect bad and only bad. *[pauseeee]*

Somewhat related to the pessimist is *the skeptic*. *[pause]*

This is the kind of person who questions everything.

They approach life with doubt and hesitation, never really feeling like they can believe anything.

And in the end, they never really land anywhere with confidence. *[pauseee]*

Lastly, you have *the realist*. *[pause]*

A realist is a person whose outlook on life is according to the facts of reality.

They do not have unrealistic expectations like the optimist, nor do they dwell in doom and gloom like the pessimist.

Rather, they are willing to accept reality as it is, whether it be good or bad. *[pauseee]*

Which outlook do you generally have? *[pauseee]*

Some of you are optimists, but others of you are pessimists. *[pause]*

Still others may be skeptics in this room, or you might say that you are a realist. *[pauseee]*

The reason that I bring this up is because the author of Ecclesiastes has a certain outlook on life. *[pauseee]*

He's definitely not an optimist.

If you read this book and think that he's an optimist, then you're reading the wrong book! *[pauseee]*

Some may call him a skeptic, but he doesn't actually question everything, rather he makes many confident truth claims, so he can't be a skeptic. *[pauseee]*

Other people may deem him a pessimist, and that *seems* right.

He says things like, "All is vanity," or, "I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive."¹ *[pause]*

That's pretty pessimistic, and it sounds like it shouldn't even be in the Bible! *[pause]*

There may be times reading through this book when you wonder, "What's with this book?" because of so many statements like that, which sound so pessimistic. *[pauseeee]*

I want to make the case that the author of Ecclesiastes is a realist—he wants to show us the reality of life in a fallen world. *[pauseeee]*

Compare Ecclesiastes with the book of Proverbs and it's radically different...

When you read Proverbs, it seems so optimistic, as it appears to promise so much. *[pause]*

¹ Ecclesiastes 4:2.

It says things like, “No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble.”²
[pauseee]

When you read that you could walk away thinking, “As long as I live wisely, then my life will go smoothly all the time!”

But Proverbs isn’t aiming to give you promises, rather, it’s aiming to give you general truths.
[pausee]

Generally, if you live righteously, you stay out of trouble, but living wickedly, you walk into trouble. *[pauseee]*

The books of Ecclesiastes and Job help balance out the picture of a life of wisdom by reminding us that we live life in a fallen world.

Life isn’t always cut-and-dry, but it’s often a mingling of joy and sorrow. *[pauseee]*

So we can’t live with our eyes closed, but we must live a life of wisdom, grounded in the reality of what life is *actually like*. *[pause]*

So Ecclesiastes aids us in opening our eyes to really *see* life, as it is.

It strips away our unrealistic expectations, shows us the bare facts of life, and by doing so, teaches us how to live in light of those facts. *[pauseeeee]*

Let’s READ the first two verses of this book, and see what it says. [\[READ 1–2\]](#)

The first thing that we see in these verses is that...

I. The wise preacher speaks!

When you first look at a book, you look for who the author is. *[pause]*

The identity of the author makes a huge difference, doesn’t it?

Often we will read a book based on who the author is, or we won’t read a book based on who it is. *[pausee]*

You are more prone to read a book by an author that you enjoy over an author that you know nothing about. *[pause]*

Well the book of Ecclesiastes starts out by sharing with us who the author is: it’s “the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” *[pauseee]*

Now there is some debate about who exactly this is...

² Proverbs 12:21.

Some people believe that a later author tried to use Solomon's identity in writing this book, but I believe that the evidence points to the fact that this is actually Solomon. *[pause]*

Solomon was definitely the son of David, and king in Jerusalem.

Not to mention, later in chapter 1, he will talk about how he had wisdom that surpassed all who went before him, which we know is true of Solomon. *[pause]*

We also hear of his wealth and wisdom, which connects well with the Solomon we know. *[pauseeee]*

The author is also called "the Preacher." *[pause]*

Sometimes you will hear commentators call him "Qohelet," which is the actual Hebrew word used here.

And it means someone who addresses an assembly, so that's why it's translated as the "Preacher" or "Teacher." *[pause]*

So Solomon in his wisdom will teach us through this book, but will you be attentive and listen to what is taught? *[pauseeee]*

Sometimes you may feel like a teacher is only scratching the surface, and isn't plumbing down into the depths and dealing with the hard questions that arise from a topic.

Well you cannot accuse Solomon of that!

Instead, in this book, Solomon will deal with life's most challenging questions, like a master teacher and preacher. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever felt something, but were afraid of sharing it with others because you were fearful that they would think that you were unspiritual? *[pause]*

Well you don't have to feel that way because many times Solomon will *give voice* to the thoughts, feelings, and questions that you have when life gets hard. *[pause]*

He is a master observer of life in all of its beauty and ugliness, not shying away from telling us the hard truth.

And he will even say what most of us are afraid of saying out loud. *[pause]*

One commentator put it this way...

"[The author] is an explorer. His concern is with the boundaries of life, and especially with the questions that most of us would hesitate to push too far."³ *[pauseeee]*

³ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, ed. J. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 13.

You see, the thing with most of us is that we are living as if this world isn't the way that it is.
[pauseeee]

Here are some evaluation questions to consider...

Do you think that things should be easier, and get really frustrated when they aren't? [pause]

That shows that you have an unrealistic idea that life should be easier than it *really* is. [pauseeee]

Maybe you are thinking, "I just thought that parenting would be easier than this!"

Or, "I didn't think adulthood would be this hard," or, "Why aren't things working out as I expected?" [pauseeee]

Maybe it's happiness...

You thought you would be happier than you are now because you got that job that you always wanted. [pause]

You thought that getting married would mean "happily ever after" and it's not. [pause]

You expected to be healthy until at least 60, but here you are before that and you are struggling with continual health issues. [pauseeee]

The problem is that we often have unrealistic expectations that are not tethered to real life.

And Solomon wants to shatter those unrealistic expectations on the rock of his book. [pause]

By the time that you are done reading this book, all unrealistic expectations will be in shambles.
[pauseeee]

Now realize that Solomon's goal is not to cause you to walk away, depressed with your head down...

His goal isn't to discourage you, but to cause you to really and truly face the facts of life.
[pauseee]

Stop acting like life isn't hard, no longer delude yourself with lies. [pause]

It's only when you can strip away all of the delusions that you can then look to what is true and real.

And it's only then that you can actually enjoy life as it is today as a gift, and to find your refuge in God alone. [pauseeee]

We need to realize that faith does not cancel out the harsh realities of life, but it helps us to know how to live rightly in the world, as it is. [pauseeee]

The author will help us to see that we are looking too much for the things in this world to provide us with something that they were *never meant* to provide us with. *[pause]*

He will teach us through this book that if you are looking for perfection on this side of Heaven, you will be disappointed time and time again.

But on the flip side, if you are only and ever pessimistic, you will miss the simple joys of life. *[pauseeee]*

So get ready for this sermon series in the coming months because all of your neat boxes will be obliterated, and set rules for how you imagine that life *should work* will be skirted around. *[pause]*

We will get a big slap of reality that will wake us up out of our dream-world stupor. *[pauseeee]*

Death is near to all of us, but will you ignore it and act like you will never die? *[pause]*

Possessions, wealth, and human wisdom are limited, but do you live like it or do you live as though they are the end-all? *[pauseeee]*

The truth is that many people live as though they will never die.

They act like the things of this world can satisfy them, and they do not truly think about *why* they are putting so much effort into things.

And Ecclesiastes will rip off those blinders, if you truly listen. *[pauseeee]*

Unrealistic expectations, delusions, and self-sufficiency will all be buried at the feet of Ecclesiastes—so buckle up! *[pauseeee]*

God wants to teach you so much through this book, will you be attentive? *[pause]*

The wise preacher speaks, but will you listen? *[pauseeee]*

Looking next at verse 2, we see what the wise preacher says...

II. The wise preacher says that all is vanity.

Listen to what he says specifically in verse 2: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” *[pauseeee]*

You don’t expect that in the Bible, do you—all is vanity? *[pause]*

You might expect it from the mouth of some super-depressed person at the end of their rope, but from the Bible? From God’s Word? *[pauseeee]*

Yet this idea of ‘vanity’ is actually a main point of the book, and he will say it again and again.

In fact, the word translated as ‘vanity’ is used around 38 times in this book, and he will say almost the same thing as he does in verse 2 all the way close to the end of the book as well.

And that shows us that “all is vanity” is a primary point that he wants us to ‘get.’ *[pauseeee]*

So what does ‘vanity’ mean here?...

It’s a word that literally means vapor, breath, or wind. *[pausee]*

Now he’s not using this word literally, but figuratively to speak of how things in life are *like* vapor or breath. *[pauseee]*

First, life is *fleeting* like a vapor: it’s here for one second, but then gone in another. *[pause]*

The years come and go quickly, and things do not last very long.

That joy that you thought that new purchase would bring you didn’t continue forever. *[pauseeee]*

Our endeavors are also like a vapor or breath in that they don’t have substance. *[pauseee]*

Imagine trying to grab the wind, but what do you get from your endeavors? An empty fist.

And this is why sometimes the author will use the parallel phrase, “striving after the wind,”⁴ when talking about vanity. *[pause]*

That’s what our man-driven efforts are like: we do so much to accomplish something, but in the end, it’s vain.

All of the accomplishments, possessions, and wealth we may accumulate do not provide us with true value, meaning, and significance because we die and they are left to someone else.

[pauseee]

This effort to grab the wind causes confusion and frustration when you end up empty-handed. *[pause]*

You don’t get what you expected, and that’s how life is: it’s a paradox and an enigma that causes frustration...

You think that the things in this life will last, but they are like a vapor or a breath—it doesn’t last or provide ultimate meaning.

And this is why life feels so frustrating at times. *[pauseee]*

Like doing things in vain, life doesn’t give you what you expected after all of the effort you put in.

⁴ See Ecclesiastes 1:14 for just one example.

So what ultimate gain do you have for everything you do?

That's Solomon's point, so no wonder he says, "Vanity of vanities!" using a superlative to highlight the vanity of it all. *[pauseee]*

Solomon wants us to evaluate our human endeavors—what do we get that's of lasting meaning and value from it all? *[pauseeee]*

We try to control life, but we can't. *[pause]*

We think we can put all of the answers into a neat box, but they don't fit. *[pause]*

We put so much effort into things, only to see them fail. *[pause]*

He wants us to see that life is often a mirage—things appear to be lasting and substantive, but they end up *gone like the wind*. *[pauseeeee]*

What's going to last?

What's going to matter in the end?

What will provide me lasting satisfaction? *[pauseeeee]*

When you evaluate things in light of those questions, they are all vain—they look like vapor and wind.

They might be temporary and real, but not lasting. *[pauseeeee]*

Imagine trying to accomplish something, but constantly being thwarted—that's what many human endeavors are like. *[pause]*

Imagine trying to find the answers, but never feeling like you've reached it—that's what life is like many times.

And we all know and feel like this isn't the way it's supposed to be, and Solomon feels it, too.

But he also wants us to sit in the knowledge that *this is real life*. *[pauseeee]*

It's only when you can face reality that you can know how to live in light of it. *[pauseeeee]*

Solomon even notes that "all" is vanity—everything.

In fact, he will take us on a quest to prove his point. *[pause]*

He will experiment with different things in life, showing us that they too are vanity—nothing is outside the scope of his experiment. *[pauseee]*

Solomon will take us on a quest for meaning and purpose and to find something of satisfaction and significance, but will again and again show us that they fail to measure up. *[pauseeeee]*

But why do this?...

Why does Solomon make it a point to say that all is vanity? [pause]

Once again, because he wants us to face reality, and not live in a dream-world of our own making. [pause]

As one commentator put it: “People are caught in the trap of the absurd and pursue empty pleasures. They build their lives on lies.”⁵ [pauseeee]

It is not loving to let people continue in delusions or to build their lives on lies. [pauseeee]

So many people think that more possessions will make them happy forever, only to be disappointed not long after. [pause]

So many think that their purpose in life is to solely get more, only to lose it all at death. [pause]

So many people try to distract themselves from the real, deep questions of life, all the while working for the shallow, fleeting things of life. [pause]

So many act like death isn’t looming, and waste their lives away.

And so many ignore God, and do not realize that that means that all of their efforts are in vain! [pauseeee]

It’s time that we dealt with the truth, with reality, with the deep questions of life and to admit with Solomon: all is vanity! [pauseeee]

Now as Christians, our discernment alarms should be blaring right now...

We know that Paul says that due to the resurrection our labor *isn’t* in vain,⁶ and that things matter for eternity because of Christ.

So how do we rectify this since we just heard Solomon say that “all is vanity”? [pauseeee]

Well there’s a key, repeated phrase in this book that helps us interpret Solomon’s words—it’s the phrase “under the sun.” [pauseeee]

Notice how he even uses it right after verse 2, for he says in verse 3, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils *under the sun*?” [pauseeee]

Everything ‘under the sun’ are those things that you can see, observe, and experience in this material world.

So what Solomon is doing is he’s examining life from an earthly perspective. [pause]

⁵ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 283.

⁶ A reference to 1 Corinthians 15:58.

It's like he's showing us that if you approach life from a mere human, earthly perspective, everything *is* vain! *[pausee]*

If you look at life 'under the sun,' things are absurd, frustrating, and pointless, but if you looked at it from an eternal, heavenly perspective, it would be different.

So in this book, the author will look with realistic, earthly eyes at life here in this fallen world, being honest with what he finds. *[pauseeee]*

He's going to try to find ultimate satisfaction and meaning in the things 'under the sun,' but find them lacking.

And here's the point: if you can't find significance, value, and meaning "under the sun", then it must be found somewhere "above the sun." *[pauseeee]*

That's the purpose of Ecclesiastes—to cause you to look at everything under the sun and see it as vain, so that you no longer look down, but *up* to the Lord. *[pauseeeee]*

No wonder Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes by saying, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."⁷ *[pauseeee]*

Living for the Lord and seeing things from His perspective is what matters.

So life isn't truly vain when you bring God into the matter. *[pause]*

And thankfully, we know the rest of the story of redemption, for through Christ's death and resurrection, He saved us so that we no longer have to whimper in vanity, but stand in victory! *[pause]*

Because He lives, we live!

So in light of what Christ has done, everything we do now matters for eternity! *[pauseeee]*

This doesn't remove the hardness of life in this fallen world, but it does change our outlook and lifestyle. *[pauseeeee]*

Now I know that we didn't get far into the book of Ecclesiastes today, but I hope that this morning was helpful to give you an overview of what Solomon is doing. *[pause]*

We need to know what Solomon is doing in this book, in order to rightly understand what he's saying.

And as we think about what Solomon is doing, we see that he is teaching us that...

Life lived only for the present without God is vain.

⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:13.

God is speaking to us through the wise preacher’s words—will you listen? *[pause]*

Are you ready to be challenged?

Are you ready to deal with the real, deep questions of life that we often try to ignore? *[pauseeee]*

Solomon tells us that all is vanity under the sun.

And so if you try to live for the things of this world, you will find them all lacking. *[pause]*

Trying to find lasting significance and satisfaction in human efforts will disappoint you over and over, for they are all vain without God.

It’s all like breath or vapor—you see it, and you try to grasp something of enduring value, but it’s gone.

So could it be that we weren’t meant to grab the wind, but we were meant to grab onto He who is the Rock? *[pauseeee]*

The Rock that we cling to is Christ!

Some people reject this Stone in order to cling to the wind, but we know that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”!

For Christ is truly the “cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”⁸ *[pauseeee]*

You will be put to shame after clinging to the vain things of this life, but never put to shame when you cling to Christ.

For it’s *He* who is lasting, firm, enduring, strong, satisfying, and worth everything! *[pauseeee]*

In connection with Him, everything matters—without Him, life is vain. *[pauseeee]*

Will you prepare your heart for what’s to come in this study of Ecclesiastes? *[pause]*

It will be challenging and stretching.

The idols of your heart will be ripped out, but good riddance! *[pause]*

It’s only when we can see that life without God is vain that we can see then that life *with* God is something good and glorious.

And it’s then that we can live rightly today and enjoy the gifts that He gives us here ‘under the sun.’

⁸ 1 Peter 2:6–7.