

**“Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” —Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NASB)**

The Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl pioneered a branch of psychological study known as *logotherapy* (*logos* – “meaning”). Frankl believed that the most powerful motivating force in a person’s life is the quest for meaning. All sorts of life-impacting problems appear once you remove meaning and the quest for it from life. In his book, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, Frankl made this observation:

At an American university, 60 students who had attempted suicide were screened afterward, and 85 percent said the reason had been that ‘life seemed meaningless.’ Most important, however, 93 percent of these students suffering from the apparent meaningless of life ‘were actively engaged socially, were performing well academically, and were on good terms with their family groups.’ What we have here, I would say, is an unheard cry for meaning, and it certainly is not limited to only one university. Consider the staggering suicide rates among American college students, second only to traffic accidents as the most frequent cause of death. Suicide *attempts* might be fifteen times more frequent.

This happens in the midst of affluent societies and in the midst of welfare states! For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the *struggle for survival* has subsided, the question has emerged: *survival for what?* Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for. (*Unheard Cry for Meaning*, 20–21)

Frankl recognized the fundamental dilemma experienced in all cultures, regardless of standard of living: *the absence of a purpose for existence*. He also acknowledged that comfort, wealth, and fleshly gratification do not solve this dilemma but provide only a superficial reprieve. He observed that even among successful graduates of world-renowned universities like Harvard, vast numbers confess profound feelings of futility and struggle to connect their successes with anything meaningful in life.

But Frankl failed to arrive at the right remedy. He believed that the solution to meaningless existence was to be found in *human freewill* and its power to define and appreciate meaningful existence for itself. But such a solution is just more of the same problem. It has been tried countless times and always found deficient. The answer to the dilemma of human meaninglessness is not more of the human himself. It must be found in something completely outside and beyond him—in the One who is man’s Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.

There is someone else to look to who recognized the same problems but who came to the correct conclusion. That man is Solomon, “the Preacher” and “wise man” who wrote “words of truth correctly” (Ecclesiastes 1:1; 12:10). His solution to man’s fundamental problem is entirely transcendent: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (12:13–14). But to understand the importance of this remedy, it is important to begin where Solomon himself begins—with the bad news.

### **I. The Transience of Human Endeavor Asserted (1:2)**

After identifying himself at the start of the book (1:1), Solomon immediately delivers a shocking declaration that sets the course for the rest of Ecclesiastes: **“Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity’** (1:2; see also 12:8, where it is repeated at the book’s end verbatim). The meaning of this assertion, and the thrust of the entire book, rests upon on the definition of the Hebrew term **הֶבֶל** (*hebel*), translated in many English Bibles as **“vanity.”** The term appears five times in the original Hebrew of 1:2—a sentence that is only eight words in total. Outside of v. 2, the term occurs another thirty-three times for a total of thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. Outside the book, the term only occurs thirty-five times in the entire Old Testament.

Our English rendering of *hebel* as “vanity” is largely due to the influence of Jerome (c. 342–420), who translated the term in the Latin as *vanitas*, meaning “worthless,” “futile,” or “meaningless.” Many English translations have maintained the same thought, translating the term as “vanity” (KJV, NASB, ESV, etc.) or even as “meaningless” (NIV, NLT). But is the concept of “meaninglessness” what Solomon intended to convey in Ecclesiastes 1:2?

The basic meaning of the Hebrew term הֶבֶל (*hebel*) is “**a puff of air, a breath, a vapor, a mist.**” Its meaning can be accurately captured by the picture of vapor that becomes visible when someone breathes out on a cold morning. In fact, *hebel* is translated this way in several instances in the Old Testament:

- **Job 7:16** – “I waste away; I will not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are *but* a breath.”
- **Psalms 144:4** – “Man is like a mere breath; his days are like a passing shadow.”
- **Psalms 39:5, 11; 94:11; Proverbs 21:6; Isaiah 57:13**

Admittedly, the Hebrew term can be translated in other ways—including in ways that signify some kind of negative moral assessment, as in the terms “vain,” “futile,” or “worthless.” For example:

- **2 Kings 17:15** – “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.”
- **Jeremiah 10:15** – “They [idols] are worthless, a work of mockery; in the time of their punishment they will perish.”

In fact, the term is even used to describe something as morally worthless and futile as “idols”:

- **Psalms 31:6** – “I hate those who regard vain idols, but I trust in the LORD.”
- **Jeremiah 10:8** – “But they are altogether stupid and foolish *in their* discipline of delusion—their idol is wood!”

In all, there are *two general possibilities* for understanding this term *hebel* in Ecclesiastes 1:2, and the conclusion one reaches has significant implications for how one views the tone of Ecclesiastes as a whole. Either the term maintains its more concrete idea of “vapor” (and thus communicates the idea of “brevity” or “fleetingness”) or it communicates a more figurative idea of “vanity” (and thus signifies “meaninglessness” or “emptiness”).

In Ecclesiastes 1:2, it is best to take it in the former sense—as *vapor*. **Solomon is not asserting that life is *meaningless, futile, or worthless*, but that life is *transitory or fleeting*.** This fits best with how the term is found in general in Ecclesiastes—for example:

- **Ecclesiastes 9:9** – “Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.”
- **Ecclesiastes 11:10** – “So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.”

*Hebel* as “vapor” fits the context of 1:2–11 best, since all of Solomon’s metaphors in this section are concrete and earthly (e.g., “under the sun”). Moreover, this understanding harmonizes best with the texts in Ecclesiastes that call upon the reader to “seize the day” and be satisfied with what God has given to be enjoyed (e.g., 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 8:15; 9:7–9). In fact, it is this idea of *fleetingness* which the New Testament writer James picks up when he writes,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. (James 4:13–14)

This makes a big difference for interpreting everything else that follows in Ecclesiastes. If life indeed was “futile” or “meaningless,” then any true enjoyment in this world would be improper, and several key conclusions stated in the book would be contradictory. But when Solomon is understood as emphasizing life’s *brevity*, then the book becomes a real source for wisdom in learning how to live in light of the transitory nature of life.

#### The Word “Vanity”

Hebrew: הֶבֶל, *hebel*

Basic meaning: *vapor, breath*

Implication for Ecclesiastes 1:2: *life is fleeting.*

Implication for Ecclesiastes as a whole: *since life is so brief, it must be lived correctly.*

Therefore, in the most intense, captivating language possible, Solomon asserts that all human life and endeavor is *but a vapor*. It disappears quickly, before one can even appreciate it. In fact, Solomon repeats the phrase twice, “**Vanity of vanities . . . Vanity of vanities,**” as if to say, “utterly transitory . . . the merest of breaths!” And he adds the additional exclamation, “**All is vanity,**” as if to say “exhaustively transitory . . . everything is a breath!”

## II. The Transience of Human Endeavor Illustrated (1:3–8)

In verse 3, Solomon restates the assertion he made in verse 2, but now as a *rhetorical question*: “**What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?**” The implied answer is *none*! The term “**advantage**” refers to a “net gain” or “profit”—that which is acquired over a set duration of time and is left over once all the expenses have been paid. This “profit” is to be measured according to “**all his work**”—a phrase that describes all that a man endeavors in his lifetime (the “all” here in v. 3 providing the context for the “all” in v. 2, “All is vanity!”). The duration of time in which this profit can be made is signified by the phrase, “**under the sun,**” a metaphor for man’s length of existence on this earth—from the moment of his *birth* to the moment of his *death*.

The implication of this question is that man does *not* enjoy endless pursuits and opportunities. There comes a time of reckoning—a time when the accounts must be reconciled. That time is *death*. Thus, what makes life so transient—such a vapor—is *death*. Just at that point in time when man thinks that he knows something and is able to achieve a profit, death terminates the opportunity. Implicit in this realization is the curse pronounced by God on Adam and all his descendants as a result of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17–19):

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

To illustrate this further, Solomon provides **four comparisons** between the duration of man’s endeavors and the duration of creation’s endeavors:

1. **The earth:** “A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (1:4). Man’s transience is contrasted with the *permanence* of his own abode. That over which man was to have dominion is now that which outlasts man by far.
2. **The sun:** “Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there again” (1:5). Man’s transience is contrasted with the *repetitiveness* and *predictability* of the sun under which he lives. Man lives and dies—he never returns for a second round.
3. **The wind:** “Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses the wind returns” (1:6). Man’s transience is contrasted with the wind’s *unimpeded continuity*. The winds always prevail; they are ceaseless. The same is not true of man.
4. **The water:** “All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again” (1:7). Man’s transience is contrasted with the unrelenting *cycle of hydrology*. Man can never step in the same river twice—because he changes.

Solomon then concludes: “**All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing**” (1:8). Man is never able to get to the end of these constant cycles of creation—he is wearied trying to grasp them, and in the end loses whatever grip he had. Despite his once-exalted status, being created “a little lower than God” (Ps 8:5; cf. Gen 1:26), man’s attempt to realize dominion is cut short by death. He returns to dust without a second chance.

## III. The Transience of Human Endeavor Defended (1:9–11)

Solomon anticipates some pushback to his assertion on the transience of man’s endeavors, and so provides a defense of his assertion in 1:9–11.

*Objection 1:* “Doesn’t each generation bring progress?” Solomon answers, “**That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun**” (v. 9). In other

words, *history does repeat itself*. The same fundamental experiences continue to be shared by each generation. The increased wealth one generation may possess compared to the previous one doesn't change the basics.

*Objection 2*: "Don't new inventions provide a basis to think this transience will change?" Solomon answers, **"Is there anything of which one might say, 'See this, it is new'? Already it has existed for ages which were before us"** (v. 10). In other words, *we're just rearranging the same building blocks*. Innovation cannot change man's basic problems.

*Objection 3*: "Doesn't man live on, even once he has died, in the memories of his descendants?" Solomon answers, **"There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur, there will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still"** (v. 11). In other words, *it is wishful thinking to base your life on how others will remember you. You don't even remember those who came before you*. Every man is forgotten by successive generations.

Ultimately, Solomon undercuts man's "deepest and vainglorious aspirations to secure some permanent place or 'remembrance' in history. A life oriented toward ensuring its legacy for posterity only pursues the wind" (Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 28).

### Hear the Preacher!

Solomon later states that "the words of wise men are like goads . . . given by one Shepherd" (12:11). Ecclesiastes 1:2–11 is one of these "goads," given by God through the sage to prick and to provoke us to serious contemplation. In this case, we are confronted by brutal truth about the reality of life's brevity. What lessons can we draw?

1. **Prepare**: Get ready to die; death will come sooner than you think. We are never to speed up death's arrival, but neither are we to pretend it will never come. Vital to right living is a proper, sober appreciation of death.
2. **Learn**: Draw the right lessons; your life is not over yet. The realization that life is fleeting will evoke much-needed self-examination. We must have the same attitude of the psalmist: "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). How must your life change, since it is a vapor?
3. **Live**: Live for that which lasts, not for that which death destroys. As one writer stated, "The best way to live one's life is to spend it on that which will last." In the words of Solomon: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (12:13–14).

### For Discussion

1. Why is it so difficult to discuss death?
2. Many think that the book of Ecclesiastes, and particularly a statement like the one found in 1:2, is entirely pessimistic—even morbid. Why is this not true?
3. If you were to end up on your deathbed tomorrow, what things would you wish you could have changed, had you known that your life would be cut short?

### For Further Study

1. In your own words, put together a careful definition of the Hebrew term translated as "vanity" in Ecclesiastes 1:2. What does this word picture communicate regarding the nature of human life?
2. List three ways you need to prepare better for death.
3. List three lessons you have learned by prayerfully meditating on Solomon's teaching on life's brevity.
4. List three improvements you will make, with God's enablement, to the way you now live life.
5. Read one chapter a day of Ecclesiastes.

**Audio, Video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** September 27, 7pm – "Understanding Leadership" (Chris Hamilton); patio fellowship @ 6:15pm