



Daily Verse and Comment

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

(12) I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. (13) And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. (14) I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.

(15) *What is* crooked cannot be made straight,
And what is lacking cannot be numbered. (16) I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." (17) And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.

(18) For in much wisdom *is* much grief,
And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

New King James Version

The book's first eleven verses do not provide much in the way of hope for one's life, but Solomon is not yet ready to explain more fully. However, he is looking for some explanations because, unlike an animal, man is created in the [likeness of God](#) and has a spirit. A man, therefore, looks for meaning in order to have some direction for living his life. Unlike animals, man does not merely exist within the narrow parameters of instinct. Though his life is difficult, man has an inner, God-given drive that his life is going somewhere. Solomon will later provide further insight into this drive.

The first mention of [God](#) appears in verse 13, and Solomon directly states that He gave us the grievous task of living by [wisdom](#). One thing that he clearly counsels us on, and also shows by his personal example, is that God does not want us to run from life's difficulties but to meet them and do our best to overcome them. The ultimate escape is through suicide, but some

attempt to escape through various addictions, and others simply give up and let others take care of them, as some are now using the government.

Verse 15 contains one of those blunt facts of life that all need to deal with without allowing themselves to become cynical yet also remaining realistic. When Solomon states, "What is crooked cannot be made straight," he is referring, not to anything material like a piece of steel, but rather to the circumstances and events of communal life. An obvious example is that the past cannot be changed. An injustice might be resolved or an apology given, but many lasting effects remain.

The Living Bible paraphrases this verse as, "What is wrong cannot be righted; it is water over the dam; and there is no use thinking of what might have been." We must remember, though, that God has the power to straighten out what is twisted and to supply what is lacking, yet even He will not change the past. However, He can change the way the past affects us, which is most encouraging to those who believe.

We do not understand very much. Paul writes in [I Corinthians 13:13](#): "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I am known." In [Romans 8:28](#), in the same chapter in which he expounds on the futility of life, he says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who [love](#) God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

Thus, by looking at it through the eyes of [faith](#), we can know about life to some degree, but at this point in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is warning us that it contains a great deal of inequity, disappointment and discouragement, evil, apparent injustice, and pain. Nations enter into wars without our permission, governments and their systems are corrupt, the courts are unfair, and businessmen lie and steal—all clearly caused by the minds and hands of men. There is so much of this, he says, it is beyond count. God could easily stop these events, but He does not!

Is it any wonder Paul says in [Galatians 1:4](#) that Christ "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will

of our God and Father"? One of the unwritten questions in Ecclesiastes is, "Why does God not stop these things?" It is not answered completely either, so verse 16 shows Solomon searching for where he might find it.

Sometimes, he seems remorseless in his effort to make us think, but even the wisdom of Solomon cannot break through on the basis of human reason. He sets his mind to study and meditate on resources that he already has on hand to further expand the possibilities of greater understanding.

When he writes in verse 17 that he set his heart "to know madness and folly," he means that he will search for answers by exploring the opposites of wisdom so that, he hopes, the contrast might reveal a deeper, clearer understanding of wisdom. The Hebrew term translated as "madness" is somewhat misleading because it is closer in meaning to "recklessness," indicating error in thinking. It is not the type of recklessness that would bring bodily injury, but it could mislead his search for factual truths.

Verse 18 shows that his efforts were not only unsuccessful but left him somewhat frustrated. Why? He does not give an answer because he has none, and he has none because he is searching under the sun. The truth is that some extremely important facets of this mystery of the ages that Solomon is investigating must be revealed from above the sun.

The conclusion to Ecclesiastes 1 should prove to us that wisdom and experience will not solve every problem in life. We must understand and live with the reality that God is not obligated to explain our problems to us. We are the sinners who chose, as Adam and Eve did, to accept Satan's deceitful offer that, if they would listen to him and eat the fruit, their eyes would be opened. They indeed gained a great deal of experiential knowledge, but their experiences also alienated them from God. We cannot expect any different result.

Life may seem monotonous and meaningless, but for those called by God, it need not be. Life now is a tremendous blessing. We must accept the reality, though, that we must [live by faith](#) in God's promises. Following His resurrection, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed" ([John 20:29](#)). [Jesus Christ](#) is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" ([I Corinthians 1:24](#)). In His mercy, He has miraculously broken into

our lives to prepare us for His Kingdom. We must take up the challenges that He has presented, cease living our lives running in circles, and head straight for the [Kingdom of God](#).

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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