

Ecclesiastes 1:12-15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-1/ecclesiastes-112-15/>

The preceding poem (verses 3-11) is the result of an exhaustive search by Solomon to use his reason and capacity for exploration in an attempt to discover the meaning of life. God created mankind with a longing to study, explore, and see—but even an exhaustive search by a capable person ends with futility if we only rely upon reason and experience.

The poem in verses 3-11 represent a conclusion: trying to arrive at meaning and purpose through human reason and experience leads to “hebel” (vapor, or *vanity*). Solomon now lets us in on the search that led him to that conclusion. He begins by reasserting his authority as *the Preacher* ([Ecclesiastes 1:1](#)). He is the “assembler”—the one who has vast resources as *king over Israel* and *wisdom* to assemble data and pursue analysis in order to explain the meaning of life. To explain *all the works which have been done under the sun*. This reiteration serves as a transition from the earlier poem to the next section of the chapter and into chapter 2.

The phrase *by wisdom* adds capability to authority, reminding the reader of Solomon’s great gift of wisdom, granted him by God ([2 Chronicles 1:7-12](#); [1 Kings 3](#)). This investigation was not merely idle curiosity, but the diligent undertaking of a wise king. Solomon has been granted by God with supernatural wisdom and the vast riches of a kingdom. These are the tools at his disposal to pursue the question of the meaning of life.

Solomon set his *mind to seek and explore*. Solomon used his *mind* to inquire and understand. As king, he had the resources at his disposal to *seek* to comprehend the world in which he lives. His seeking was done by experience; Solomon set out to *explore*. This was not just a mental exercise.

He echoes the conclusion of the opening statement, telling us that his drive to seek an explanation for life is something humanity is *afflicted with*. We already know from the introduction why it is an affliction; because it is futile trying to explain the meaning of life through human reason. Which is why Solomon calls it a *grievous task*.

Solomon’s exploration was exhaustive. He planned to explore *all that has been done under heaven*. The phrase *all that has been done* is a translation

of a single Hebrew word “asah.” “Asah” is a verb that appears over 2600 times in the Old Testament and is used to refer to actions or deeds in the broadest sense. Solomon set out to make a comprehensive inquiry.

There are two other Hebrew words for “work” in Ecclesiastes. One refers to the agony within work and is often translated toil, as in [Ecclesiastes 1:3](#). The other word is used in the sense of a job or occupation. This is the word translated as *task* in the phrase *a grievous task*. It is a translation of “inyan,” the third word used for work in Ecclesiastes.

Interestingly, “inyan” is found eight times throughout all Hebrew Scripture and all eight times are within the book of Ecclesiastes. The “inyan,” or occupation, of mankind is to explore and understand the world around them. God put into the heart of humans the job of seeking, exploring, and understanding the world around us. After his investigation, Solomon describes this *grievous* job as something God *afflicted* humans with. It is a job that can’t be completed on our own, just relying on our human capacities.

Solomon again emphasizes the exhaustive nature of his inquiry, stating, *I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun*. Solomon uses “ma’aseh” which includes the word for work that refers to actions in the broadest sense. Throughout Ecclesiastes we will see the result of Solomon’s job (inyan) to understand. Solomon, like each of us, wants to comprehend the whys of life. His innate humanity has given him this compulsion. Perhaps his extra dose of wisdom has heightened this desire.

Yet he concludes that this is *vanity* (“hebel”), an uncertainty of human life—we are not satisfied until we understand, yet we are not capable of complete comprehension. This is why our job (“inyan”) to seek and understand is *grievous*.

It is this *task* which *God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with*. *Exploring* all that *goes on under the sun*, even with the help of *wisdom*, is a *grievous* and *grueling job*. One that never properly gets accomplished. God is the source of this compulsion. It is He who made mankind with this compulsion to know, to understand.

At this point Solomon has only acknowledged that God placed the desire to understand within our hearts, but he is seeking to understand using his own faculties. Solomon has told us in advance that his quest will be unsuccessful.

The word for *grievous*, “ra’,” is often translated evil. In fact, the tree in the garden that mankind was supposed to avoid was the tree of good and *grievous* (“ra”) ([Genesis 2:9](#)). The same term is used here in Ecclesiastes.

Solomon says these *works* are all *vanity and a striving after the wind*. The word *hebel* (translated as *vanity*) means a vapor or mist. And *striving after the wind* is a phrase that invokes the image of futility. We can feel the wind or observe a mist, but we can’t catch them. We can’t hold them in our hand. They escape our grasp. So it is with striving to discover a philosophy that satisfies our desire to make sense of it all.

Solomon combines *vanity* with *striving after the wind* to double down on his assertion from earlier in the text that *all is vanity* ([Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)). Hebrew uses repetition for emphasis. It seems a bit hyperbolic at first to say *all* is “*hebel*.” But as Solomon makes his case, it becomes clear he really means *all*. He made a comprehensive investigation, and now provides a comprehensive conclusion. When humans attempt to gain complete comprehension starting from themselves, *all is vanity*.

This section finishes with the phrase *what is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted*. Solomon uses two illustrations for futility. Once something is *crooked* you can’t ever make it perfectly straight again. And you can’t count something you don’t have. If someone asked you to “Please go count how many apples we don’t have in the pantry” you might think they were a little crazy. Solomon concludes after his comprehensive investigation that trying to determine the meaning of life by human faculties is like trying to count how many apples you don’t have. It is futile.

Solomon has said this exploration of meaning is *a grievous task which God has given*. And that it is *vanity, a striving after the wind*. Solomon has set the tension here. God has made it this way, and has given us a desire to know, yet we do not have the capacity to understand. Solomon is the wisest man who has ever lived. He had massive resources at his disposal. Yet he couldn’t figure it out. So it isn’t going to be figured out. God has made work as a *vapor* and asked us to *toil* after it. But we cannot grasp the unfathomable just as we *cannot straighten a crooked thing*.

If you wonder why Solomon would bother to tell us such grim news, it is because before we can make a plan to get somewhere, we first must know where we are. Solomon is giving us a dose of current reality. There is more to the story. There is a redeeming conclusion to the book. Faith will be the

answer to the dilemma. But we must first exhaust its alternative, and see if we can reach a satisfactory conclusion through reason and experience.

Biblical Text:

¹²I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which* God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. ¹⁴I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. ¹⁵What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted.