

Ecclesiastes 1:3-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-1/ecclesiastes-13-7/>

Solomon describes God's creation as productive, reliable, and cyclical. He contrasts this with the limited and confused life of a man, questioning the value of man's effort when patterns are destined to repeat themselves.

Solomon begins to clarify his statement about the “ungraspable” (hebel) with a poem designed to focus attention on what is and is not possible to achieve through human labor, asking, *What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?*

There are a few words for “work” in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew word *amal* (used here) refers to troublesome work. It has a negative connotation and is often translated *toil*, labor, mischief, misery, sorrow, grievance, etc. throughout the Old Testament. It is particularly the strain or struggle of work.

Amal occurs in this verse both as a noun (“work”) and verb, which is translated as “does.” This makes it a very strong statement: “...*in all his work which he does...*” This “toilsome labor” word is used thirty-five times in Ecclesiastes. Here the question is “What advantage does it bring?” The presumption is that it is going to happen. Life has toil.

This might remind the reader of the result of Adam's fall in which frustration is added to man's work ([Genesis 3:17-19](#)). The Genesis illustration is frustration that stems from trying to grow plants that produce fruit and instead getting weeds. Work was God's gift to humanity. The first thing God did was give Adam a job to subdue the earth ([Genesis 1:28](#)). But the frustration of work was a part of the curse. “Toil” is a direct result of sin in the world. Given that it is now toilsome, Solomon asks whether there is any *advantage* innate within this *work*?

To illustrate this point, Solomon launches into a poem about the cycles of nature. Humans come and go, but nature just keeps on repeating its cycles. Solomon notes, *A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.* So nature keeps repeating cycles. The cycles are going to keep happening *forever*—so long as the earth remains. But we as humans come to an end, only to see another *generation* rise. So what difference does

it make that we were here in the first place? Are we just here to perpetuate a cycle of *generations*? What *advantage* does that create for us? Are we just like hamsters running on a treadmill, exerting effort but going nowhere?

This poem compares God's labors, which keep going *forever*, to man's labors, which come and go. It suggests a comparison between human endeavors, that begin and end, with God's endeavors, that continue endlessly. Solomon will conclude that this should lead us to faith in order to resolve the tension. But at this point, he is still making observations.

The results of *work* are temporary. We eat, but are soon after hungry. We gather wealth but cannot take it with us when we die. Therefore the results of *work* are vaporous, "hebel." There is no apparent *advantage*. Solomon has great wisdom and skill to observe. And when he does, the benefit to work is not apparent.

Human *generations*, *sun*, *wind*, and *river* are all used as examples that form a cycle. They *come and go*, only to come (and go) once more. It is a merry-go-round. While each human carries through in a finite straight line, the heavens work in an infinite cycle.

The *wind continues swirling along* changing directions in regular patterns *on its circular courses*. Sometimes the wind blows *toward the south*, and other times it turns *toward the north*. But it keeps moving. There is no resting place. No end. The wind continues coming and going.

Rivers are crucial to human survival in every part of the earth and no observant person would fail to recognize their many benefits. Yet the cyclical, never-ending process by which they do their "work" brings no conclusion (1:7). *All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full*. The seas evaporate, the snow falls on the mountains, melts and flows into the river, only to return to the sea. *To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again*.

Like the wind, the water cycle is circular. It keeps moving, repeating. By contrast, our life begins and ends. And so what? What is the *advantage* to all the effort we put into our lives?

Generations arrive and begin their toil. Then inevitably go away. The *sun rises* to bring warmth, but then *sets*. And *hastening to its place it rises* another day, *again*. Like clockwork—literally. The *wind blows toward the south* and *north*, and continues *swirling around*. The *rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full*. The purpose, like a vapor, initially appears to be

straightforward, yet upon further examination disappears in your hands. It does not end, and *does not fill*.

Solomon will provide answers. But the answer is not a matter of logical deduction based on observation. At this point Solomon is primarily posing the dilemma.

There is, however, a subtle hint at hope in this poem. *The earth remains forever*. The fact that these cycles are so dependable, and so stable, hints that there is a Creator with a purpose. But what does that mean for us? The answer is not found in our deeds, our accomplishments. Solomon will continue his investigation.

Biblical Text:

**³ What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?**

**⁴ A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.**

**⁵ Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there *again*.**

**⁶ Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.**

**⁷ All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.**