

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

Analysis

The book's opening thesis statement employs quintuple repetition—'vanity of vanities... vanity of vanities; all is vanity'—creating a superlative construction meaning 'the ultimate vanity' or 'the emptiest of all emptiness.' The Hebrew word 'hevel' (הֶבֶל) literally means 'breath' or 'vapor,' connoting something transient, insubstantial, and fleeting. The Preacher uses this key term 38 times throughout the book, establishing it as the central motif for evaluating life 'under the sun' (apart from God's eternal perspective). This isn't nihilistic despair but realistic assessment: human achievements, pleasures, and wisdom pursued as ultimate ends prove ephemeral and unsatisfying. The verse prepares readers for a radical reorientation: lasting meaning cannot be found in temporal pursuits but only in fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13).

Historical Context

Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes late in his reign (circa 935 BC) after experiencing unprecedented wealth, wisdom, and accomplishment—yet finding none of it ultimately satisfying. His personal journey from youthful devotion through spiritual compromise with foreign wives (1 Kings 11) to late-life repentance provides biographical context for the book's sobering reflections. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature generally promoted the view that wisdom leads to prosperity and happiness, but Ecclesiastes challenges this simplistic equation. The post-exilic Jewish community, struggling with the gap between covenant promises and difficult realities, found in Ecclesiastes permission to voice honest questions about

life's meaning while maintaining faith in God's sovereignty. This opening proclamation resonates with Jesus's warning: 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?' (Mark 8:36).

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What pursuits in your life—career success, relationships, possessions, experiences—are you treating as ultimate sources of meaning rather than as temporary gifts from God?
2. How does recognizing the 'vanity' (temporary, vapor-like nature) of earthly achievements free you from both frantic striving and crushing disappointment?

Interlinear Text

הַבָּלִ:	הַבָּלִ:	אִם ר	קֹה לֵת	הַבָּלִ:	הַבָּלִ:	הַפּ ל	הַבָּלִ:
Vanity	Vanity	saith	the Preacher	Vanity	Vanity	H3605	Vanity
H1892	H1892	H559	H6953	H1892	H1892		H1892

Additional Cross-References

Romans 8:20 (Parallel theme): For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope,

Psalms 144:4 (Parallel theme): Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 (Parallel theme): He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

Ecclesiastes 12:8 (Parallel theme): Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:19 (Parallel theme): And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:26 (Parallel theme): For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (Parallel theme): Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:17 (Parallel theme): Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 2:23 (Parallel theme): For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 (Parallel theme): Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.