

Exploring
ECCLESIASTES

THE JOHN PHILLIPS COMMENTARY SERIES

Exploring
ECCLESIASTES

An Expository Commentary

JOHN PHILLIPS

with Jim Hastings

 **Kregel**
Publications

Exploring Ecclesiastes: An Expository Commentary

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Summary Outline of Ecclesiastes

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Introduction

Solomon, it seems, was growing old when he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. His wives had already turned away his heart from his earlier commitment to the living God (1 Kings 11:4). He had already faced God's anger because of his compromise with idolatry with the foulest and fiercest king of idolatry, and the sentence of judgment had come—delivered by the prophet Ahijah. He was old, too, when his protégé, the capable and ambitious Jeroboam, began to plot against him. The first snowflake, herald of the coming night.

Solomon hated the very thought of old age. Indeed, toward the end of Ecclesiastes, he graphically describes the aging process (Ecclesiastes 12:1–8). His dismay at the thought that he himself was now numbered among the aged is all the more poignant by the graphic poetry he employs to spread his farce abroad. His old age did one thing for him, it gave force to his determination to salvage something at least from the wreckage of his life. In his old age Solomon's eyes were opened and he became wise again (Ecclesiastes 12:9–10). The book of Ecclesiastes was his offering upon the altar of his repentance and remorse to make whatever amends he could. By and large, it is a wail of despair over his follies and exposure of the emptiness of secular humanism, a warning to all future generations, and an appeal to the young people before whom he had set such a terrible example not to leave God out of their lives.

Solomon might well have borrowed the language of the Gospel hymn writer:

I tried the broken cisterns, ah!
But how the waters failed;

even as I stooped to drink they fled,
and mocked me as I wailed.

And in his belated restoration to the truth, he would also have endorsed the hymn writer's antidote:

Now none but Christ can satisfy,
none other name for me!
There's love and life and lasting joy,
Christ Jesus found in thee.¹

But even in his repentance and inspired one more time by the Holy Spirit, Solomon does not seem to rise much beyond this knowledge of God as Elohim, God of Creation. His tolerance for the pagan gods of his wives, the shrines he had countenanced for such monstrosities as Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Molech, and the rest, had left its shadow on his soul. Backsliding always leaves its mark.

John Phillips

Tribute to Dr. John Phillips

I had determined in my mind to complete a doctorate. Therefore, in the fall of 1990, I left Houston and made my way to Florida for the first day of my first class of my first semester. I arrived early to find the room lined with six-foot tables so close together that it was almost impossible to maneuver through the chairs to get a seat. Being early, I chose a seat in the front row, just to the right of the teacher's desk. The morning sun was blazing through the window, or I would have taken a chair dead center in front of the desk. The first three hours dragged on; I had been to funerals that were more exciting! Needless to say, I was thrilled when the lunch break came. I remember thinking, "What in the world am I doing here? This is ridiculous!" Most of my classmates went out to eat in groups together, but because I did not know anyone, I remained in the room through the break. To tell the truth, most of my classmates that I did, in fact, know—from a distance at least—were all well on their way to being in the "Who's Who" of the Christian faith—some of them were pastors with their services on nationwide television at the time. I must say, I was a little intimidated by most of them!

As the class began to reassemble, there was an explosion of excitement that I have rarely experienced in a class setting.

"Dr. Phillips is coming. Dr. Phillips is coming!"

I thought, *Who in the world is Dr. Phillips?* I was a musician, a minister of music, not a preacher! A man brought in a tabletop lectern and placed it right in front of me. My stuff began to fall on the floor, and as I was picking it up, the class began to applaud as this short man walked like a soldier around the left side of the room, across the front, and took his place right in front of me. He calmed the

room and said, “Please turn to our text for today, Psalm 24.” He began to speak. I was amazed! Why? Almost everyone in the class was quoting his message—as he spoke—word for word! I asked a man sitting by me, “Who is this guy?”

He said, “Oh, he is the preacher’s preacher! Every preacher worth his salt uses his sermons and books.”

Needless to say, by the end of his sermon, I, too, was hooked. I did not care who this man was—I, too, had to have his books! There were about sixteen in print at that time, and I had to own them all! And I did! I devoured them all. Today, I own every book he published, and I have given many sets away to young preachers through the years. In 1994, as I began to write my commentary on the Bible, I decided to mimic the writing style of Dr. Phillips. I figured that if Paul told his listeners to imitate him because he was imitating Christ, Dr. Phillips could be my Paul to imitate Christ.

Speed ahead to March 2017. Almost twenty-seven years had passed, and I was cleaning up my commentary on Ecclesiastes before sending it off to the printer. Years ago, I determined to write commentaries with what I call “low-hanging fruit.” I wanted them to be low enough for a child to reach up and grab a piece of juicy fruit but not so low that the mature Christian could not reach down to obtain a piece too. I was struggling with Ecclesiastes 10:1, “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour.” I just wasn’t happy with what was on the page. I thought, *I don’t remember what Dr. Phillips said about that passage.* I went to my shelf and, to my surprise, my *Exploring Ecclesiastes* was not there! I looked and looked for it and could not find it anywhere. I was so puzzled. I finally decided I would buy another copy—but there was not one to be found. Here is where a strange series of events began in this journey for me.

I found www.drjohnphillips.com and hit the contact button. I put in all my information, and I fired off a note asking where I could find *Exploring Ecclesiastes* for sale. To my surprise, Mrs. Betty Phillips gave me a call. She explained that Ecclesiastes was his only uncompleted manuscript. I was shocked. I knew so much about Ecclesiastes from Dr. Phillips, I thought I could see the book in my mind’s eye. It was white with red lettering, in the same binding as the first printing of his *Exploring the Love Song of Solomon*. I was just dumbfounded! A few days later, a handwritten manuscript arrived at my door with the following note.

Dear Jim,

I have just reread your letter and I am quite excited about the possibility of working with you. Just talked with you. I obviously will not finish my

letter. I dislike the idea intensely of leaving John's book unfinished. My guess is that I came across pretty clearly to you.

*Sincerely,
Betty Phillips*

First of all, it wasn't my letter! Then, to my amazement, I was holding the original 216-page handwritten manuscript of Dr. Phillips. There are movies made about this kind of stuff, but I never thought it would happen to me. Obviously, I immediately called Mrs. Phillips, and she was very clear that she wanted me to attempt to "finish it."

And so, I began. First, Sam Locatelli typed the manuscript for me. Second, I reread every book of Dr. Phillips word for word and cataloged all mentions of Ecclesiastes. Third, I picked up at Ecclesiastes 5:9 where he had laid down his pen and finished the chapter. Rosemary Rayburn proofed the twenty pages of copy, and I mailed it to Mrs. Phillips for approval. (May I also mention at this point Dr. Kay Hastings, my wife, Tony Minchew, Becky French, Amber McGowen, Donna Manahan, Cookie Gouger, Karen Jones, Sally Hecker, as well as Rosemary Rayburn, who all helped with the proofing of the manuscript.) If Mrs. Phillips and the board thought it was good enough, I would continue; if not, I would stop. Mind you, there were multiple conversations going on all the while—too numerous to record here.

Word came back that I was to complete the manuscript. Then one week later a call came—an unfortunate mistake had been made. I had been confused with another young preacher who was working on the book, the one who had written the letter. To make matters worse, the original manuscript was missing. That problem was an easy fix—I sent it back immediately. The issue of the other writer was a different story.

One of Dr. Phillips' lifelong friends, who had been in contact with Mrs. Phillips, called me. He had arranged with her that his young pastor would complete the manuscript, but his phone call was not intended to bring my journey to an end; rather, his call was to convey that his young pastor friend was overwhelmed by the project and did not feel prepared for the task. By that time, the family had twenty pages of my work, and I had fifty-five pages completed in all. After more conversations, I was granted the privilege of attempting to complete the work.

Dr. Phillips had completed the outline. Without that, I would have been without direction. In one of my classes, Dr. Phillips explained how he always completed the outline before he ever began to write. He taught us how to do

what he did. He taught us how to outline based on the text. He was quite concerned that many preachers wrote their sermon first and then came up with a cutesy outline that was forced to fit the message and rarely fit the text. When I saw the outline, I immediately knew what he wanted to say. All I had to do was to turn the outline into sentences and add the illustrations. To do that, I found within the other published works of Dr. Phillips 249 references to Ecclesiastes. In many of those references, he used an Ecclesiastes passage as an illustration to explain the text in the other book. For this work, I reversed the process. For instance, if he used Ecclesiastes as an example of a passage in Psalms, I used that same Psalms passage as an example in Ecclesiastes. With that method, I could be assured that I was presenting the thoughts of Dr. Phillips concerning the text at hand, at least in those passages. Of course, he had his favorite illustrations, and many times the same illustrations were duplicated in his books; thus, the new illustrations are of my choice.

It was not my intent to write like Dr. Phillips. Yet it was my intent that you would not be able to tell where he stopped and I started. Hopefully I have done that. It is not for me to pretend that I am Dr. Phillips. I've done this for the sake of the message when you take it and rework it for your congregation. The big personal illustrations taken from my life are written as if I am speaking of someone else. But then you will notice a footnote that tells you it is from my personal life.

We preachers like to speak of internal and external evidence surrounding a text of Scripture. For me, it was no different. I wanted to know why Dr. Phillips did not finish this book. He published at least thirty books after starting this one. The answer to that question resides in heaven! So I had to be satisfied with asking *when* he stopped writing the book. The specific answer to that question I can reduce to within three years.

By looking at the external evidence within his other published works, I found clues that he was at least working on the outline as early as the mid-1970s. Different portions of this outline can be found in those early works. At the other end, in 1999, he delivered a summary message called "Chasing the Wind" in which he used thirty minutes to communicate what he had completed through chapter 5, and then he spent ten minutes skipping through the rest of the outline to complete his message. That message is transcribed and attached at the end of this commentary. And by the way, I am extremely thankful to Dr. Jerry Vines for leading me to that message.

Internally, in this manuscript, he mentioned having only twenty books in print. That would take the writing to about 1995–96. Also internally, he referenced

two recent articles from two magazines, one from June 1997 and the other from July 1997. No other illustration in the manuscript occurred after July of 1997.

That leads us to return to one last external piece of evidence not found in his books. By 1997, Dr. Phillips' first wife was gravely ill, and his attention turned to her. I dare say that hardly any man could pick up the pen and write about the grief of impending death found in Solomon's Ecclesiastes sermon under those same circumstances. Mrs. Jean Phillips died on January 8, 1998. Dr. Phillips would go on to marry Betty, the one who sent me the manuscript. By the way, Jean had suggested to Dr. Phillips that if he ever wanted to marry again, she hoped it would be to Betty.

When I received his handwritten manuscript, I did not change one thing about it. The outline is his, the commentary is his down to chapter 5, verse 8. After that, it has been my privilege to be Dr. Phillips' Joshua, to gather the words to complete this incredible commentary of a book inspired by the Holy Spirit and included in the Holy Writ for one purpose: to record for all generations the hopeless state of a life wasted on the world's wisdom, devoid of God's wisdom. The book of Ecclesiastes is most certainly biblical for it resides in the pages of God's Holy Word, but the majority of what is found within its pages is not Godly, it is not holy, it is not righteous. It is man's way, man's desires, man's nature, all without God. Studies of recent Bible teachers have attempted to find righteous truth in every verse; truth can be found in its words but with only a hint of righteousness scattered here and there throughout the book.

That leads me to this point in the introduction. Dr. Phillips was used by the Lord to reveal to preachers and Bible students the true intent of God. His years of study produced in his sermons inspiring illustrations of the original meaning of the text often lost in the translation from the original language to English. My dear friend Dr. Bailey Smith often invited Dr. Phillips to preach at his Bible conferences. One day the two were sitting together in a car outside a church. It was during a difficult time in Dr. Phillips' life. He was reminiscing over his purpose in the ministry. He said to Bailey something like this: "I just do not understand. I preach my heart out and just a soul or two comes to the Lord. You preach your heart out and hundreds come to know the Lord." Bailey replied, "Oh, but Dr. Phillips, if it wasn't for you, the rest of us preachers wouldn't know what to preach." In many ways, I can give that a hearty amen! God uses Dr. Smith as an evangelist; He used Dr. Phillips as a preacher. Although the two can stand in the same pulpit, the Lord uses one to draw the net, and He uses the other to instruct and mature—the two are different offices in the Church.

There is another difference too; Dr. Phillips wrote his messages with the intent of their being preached long after he joined his Lord in heaven. His words are not recorded in an archive for no purpose at all. “Take them, preach them,” he would say, “and let the Lord use them for their intended purposes.”

By 2003, Dr. Phillips had more than fifty books in print. Quite an accomplishment. Many of them had been in the works for years. But another thing was going on in his life—his health was beginning to take a turn for the worse. By 2010, he was struggling. A stepdaughter, Dianna Lightfoot, offers the following tribute about her stepfather.

The last few days of John Phillips’ life were spent in hospice. In this intense and sad setting, friends and family came and went throughout the day and night. One night when everyone else had gone, I sat by his bed holding his hand. It was hot from fever; his eyes were closed, and he moaned and writhed as the lack of moisture in his body caused painful leg cramping. He would hold his arms up as though reaching toward heaven, and at one point, I could no longer stand to see the suffering. I began to cry and pray out loud, “God please, please take this away, don’t let this go on.” Suddenly, the room became very quiet. I opened my eyes, and he was looking at me. He took my hand and placed it on his heart, with a weak smile he shook his head slowly no and said one word, “Submission.” I will never forget that word as long as I live. It may have been the most instructive moment of my life.

Several family members were there with him on July 25, 2010. His new wife, Betty Jean Ferrell Phillips, his four children, Joanne Christensen, Marilyn Lobough, Audrey Jose, and John Phillips, and one of his four stepchildren, Dianna Lightfoot.

Dianna continued her story and said, “For many minutes before he died, he reached upward, I believe simply waiting for heavenly hands to take him home.”

Jesus promised in John 14:2–3 the following: “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” We have all heard that Scripture, but have we all caught the magnitude of its meaning? For the one who belongs to the Lord, He Himself will come to this place to take us to be with Him. Hallelujah! What a Savior! Selah! What do you think of that (one of Dr. Phillips’ favorite questions!)?

Dr. Phillips came into this world on February 11, 1927, in Newport, South Wales, in the United Kingdom. Dr. Phillips served in the British army in Palestine during the closing years of the British Mandate and witnessed the events that led up to the rebirth of the state of Israel. He moved to Canada after World War 2, where he worked for a British bank, married, and in time founded a small church. Later, he joined the staff of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, where he served as assistant director of its Correspondence School. He also taught in the Evening Extension School and spoke regularly over the Moody Radio Network. In addition, he served as director of the Emmaus Correspondence School, at the time the largest school of its kind in the world. Dr. Phillips held a doctor of ministry degree from Luther Rice Seminary. As you can tell, he taught and wrote about the Bible for just about his entire adult life.

At about 4:00 p.m. on the afternoon of July 25, 2010, Dr. John Phillips made the journey of a lifetime, from the surly bonds of this temporal life on earth to the majestic realm of God. He had preached about it so many times. He knew it well. In submission, he was waiting for it. Not too quick, not too slow, neither to the right, neither to the left. He saw the sweet Lord Jesus coming to take him away, and he reached up to take His hand. Away he went with his Lord. Up, up, up through the atmosphere, leaving behind the old body of clay. Up, up, up to the twelve steps to the city of God, each of a different precious stone. Up, up, up each step they trod to the eastern entrance of the city, right past the pearly gate and onto the golden Hallelujah Boulevard. Down that street they headed west, capturing a glimpse of the river with trees covered in fruit and leaves for healing the nations. He could hear the choir of angels down the road. They would speak lowly and then the chorus would raise in glorious refrain, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. Blessing and honor and glory forever and ever.”

You have heard those words. You know the routine. On down the way, the Lord and John headed toward the sound of the choir. The ground looked like a sea of emerald glass. The Holy City made of gold. On down they went right through Hallelujah Square and on until they reached the throne of the Majesty on High—the one and only God the Father. The Lord Jesus had John by the hand and He said, “Father, this is John Phillips. He belongs to Me, and I belong to him.” The Father looked at John and said, “Well done, My child, My good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your salvation.” The crown of life was placed on his head as well as all the rewards that were waiting for him there!

Oh, he had made it! He thanked the Father, he thanked the Son, and he looked around and found all his loved ones that had made the journey before

he did. For you see, in that instant, in the blink of an eye, from here on earth to there with the Lord, the fog that blinds us from knowing all there is to know had been removed. Paul said it this way: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Corinthians 13:12–13).

All of a sudden, John knows the answers to all the questions he had from all the years of serving the Lord. Moreover, he knows exactly what the future holds for all those left on earth. He knows when they think of him. He knows about this task to complete his manuscript—he knows, and he understands like no one left behind here on earth can. His title to his eternity was sealed, notarized by the Holy Spirit, delivered to the courthouse by the Son of God, and signed by God the Father Himself! Well done, Dr. John. In some ways we are jealous of the glory that you have experienced, but our time will come and you will be there to welcome us after we have met God face-to-face!

Solomon understood none of that as his days were coming to an end! David, his father, knew all of it. Solomon did not. He had wasted his opportunities, and he could not see past his death to see his beginning. With that all said, whom would you rather be like? Solomon? Dr. John Phillips? Now on to Solomon’s sermon that recorded for all time the emptiness, the vanity of vanities, found in the world. Let it stir each heart to move in the right direction away from the monstrosities of the gods of this world that Solomon sought and on to the God of Creation that Dr. John Phillips sought!

Jim Hastings
June 2018

PART 1

The Preacher's Subject

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

PART I: THE PREACHER'S SUBJECT (I:I-II)

- A. The Preacher (1:1)
 - 1. What He Was (1:1a)
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 - i) Philosophy Does Not Have the Answer (1:10)
 - 2. A Frustrated Sequel (1:11)
 - a) The Frustrating Incompleteness of Our History Books (1:11a)
 - b) The Frustrating Inference of Our History Books (1:11b)

PART I: THE PREACHER'S SUBJECT (I:I-II)

- A. The Preacher (1:1)
 - 1. What He Was (1:1a)
 - 2. Who He Was (1:1b)
 - 3. Where He Was (1:1c)

*T*he words of the Preacher . . . (1:1a). Kings are rarely noted for being preachers. Warriors, statesmen, law givers, yes! But preachers? No! The Hebrew word Solomon uses to describe himself is *kobelet*, from *kabel*—“to call,” “to assemble,” “to gather together”—he proclaims himself to be a collector of wisdom to speak to the people.

Solomon had adopted this role at the beginning of his reign (1 Kings 8:1, 2, 5)

when he gathered his people together to lead them in a prayer and proclamation at the dedication of the Temple. It was a role to which Solomon now returned at the end of his wilderness wanderings in the pursuit of pleasure, power, and praise.

There can really be no doubt as to who the preacher was, to whom we are introduced at the very beginning of this twelve-chapter sermon. He tells us himself he was “. . . *the son of David*” (1:1b). Nor can there be any question as to what he was. He was “king.” Furthermore, there can be no doubt as to where he was: “*king in Jerusalem*” (1:1c). True, Solomon did not actually sign this book, but we know that the one who was king in Jerusalem was Solomon.

Long before the time of Christ, this book found its way into the Hebrew Bible. The universal consent of antiquity attributed the authorship to Solomon. The Greek and Latin Fathers agreed. Jewish commentators entertained some doubts concerning the contents but never disputed its authorship. It was Martin Luther who first ridiculed the traditional view and stated it was his opinion that the book was composed by Sirach in the time of the Maccabees. Very little attention was paid to Luther until, at the close of the nineteenth century, his opinion attracted the attention of the German destructive critics. We reject out of hand the idea that some centuries after Solomon an unknown writer impersonated him because of his vast and varied knowledge of human nature, thought, and circumstance in order to secure an audience for his own thoughts and opinions. Such a view is incompatible with the revelation and plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture, which is the hallmark of all the Bible.

Though Solomon did not actually sign the book, he identified himself plainly enough with his opening verse. Thus, it is that we have in our Bible, a book divinely inspired by the Spirit of God and authored by a man of wide experience of life to show us the folly and futility of worldly-mindedness, living solely “under the sun.” This is a book given to us by God to expose once and for all the total inadequacy of the perspectives, plans, and prospects of the unsaved individual and the backslidden believer, as well as such people who have their day and then the end comes as it came to the dismayed and disillusioned Solomon, king in Jerusalem.

The book is of great importance and incalculable value. God allowed Solomon to have everything this world could offer. He had wealth and power. He had a brilliant mind and vast experience. He had a rich spiritual heritage and commanded wide respect and influence. Consider, for instance, the city and country over which he ruled. Jerusalem had a growing population and attracted

an ever-flowing stream of talent and enterprise. Solomon's first great undertaking, the building of the Temple, revealed him to be a capable leader and a born administrator. The royal palace he subsequently built covered an area four times that of the Temple.

Solomon fortified the nation he inherited, fully aware that he was not the warrior-king his father, David, had been. Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Baalath, Tamar, and Beth-horon were all strategically located. These fortress cities were supplemented by other important cities for his chariots and cavalry. His love of building seemed to grow as time went on. His trading expeditions brought him ever-increasing wealth and ever-increasing oriental luxury in the beginning. It was a development that was not only demoralizing but also dangerous, especially as his polygamy soon knew no bounds.

Before long, strangers, formerly regarded as heathens, poured into Jerusalem. Solomon absorbed their ideas, became familiar with their customs, married hosts of their women, seemed to tolerate their religions, and, eventually, practically turned Jerusalem into Babylon. This was all the more inexcusable because God twice appeared personally to Solomon, something he never did to David.

This was "the preacher." He certainly did not lack for source material for his sermon. Of all the kings of Israel and Judah, only Solomon had the means, the experience, and the motivation to write this book that is supremely concerned with materialism and the high cost of backsliding.

In this sermon, Solomon proves from experience, observation, and deduction that a life lived without God is futile, empty, and pointless. Nothing ever lasts. We become bored with our works. Pleasures satiate. Philosophy raises more questions than it answers. Disappointment comes. Death appears on the horizon. All these somber threads are woven into the tapestry of this preacher's sermon. Gloom and doom lurk everywhere. Nothing "under the sun" satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart.

Solomon would have agreed with the poet Lord Byron. On the day he completed his thirty-sixth year, he cried:

My days are in the yellow leaf,
The flowers and fruits of life are gone;

The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone.¹

B. The Problem (1:2–3)

1. The Great Quotations (1:2)

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:2). The nation of Israel never recovered from the damage Solomon did to it. There was oppression on the one side and abomination on the other.

For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. (1 Kings 11:4–8)

No wonder God’s anger was kindled against the king. He had taken a tour of the city. He had seen these various abominations, dedicated to whoredom and child sacrifice—here, there, and everywhere throughout the city. The worship of Baal and Ashtoreth was consummated with a temple harlot. The worship of Molech climaxed in the placing of a living child on the red-hot lap of the idol while the drummers worked themselves into a frenzy to drown out the screams of the victim. In 1 Kings 11, God is essentially saying, “For David’s sake, I’ll wait until you’re dead. I’m going to tear your kingdom to pieces” (see vv. 11–13).

At first, Solomon was angry. He was astute enough to know where his danger lay. He had an ambitious young administrator, thoroughly capable and influential, by the name of Jeroboam. He was the one to watch. The people, fed up with Solomon’s exactions, would turn to open rebellion given the right leader, especially the northern tribes.

Then came word that Ahijah the prophet had graphically conveyed to Jeroboam that he was destined to rule over ten of the tribes. Solomon decided to have Jeroboam put to death. The plan failed, and Jeroboam escaped to Egypt and bided his time (1 Kings 11:40).

In time Solomon resigned himself to the fact he had thrown away an empire, sold his birthright, indeed, for a mess of this world’s pottage. It was only a matter

of time. He viewed his empty-headed son Rehoboam with a jaundiced eye. Rehoboam was a fool, and Solomon knew it. All of Solomon's proverbs regarding fools are given added potency by the fact that Rehoboam was incapable of learning from any of them. Doubtless Solomon could envision in his mind's eye the kind of idiocy which would pass for statesmanship with Rehoboam once he was on the throne.

We can picture Solomon sitting moodily in his library brooding over his misspent life. Surely, he had built the Temple, but that had been David's vision, not his; even so, it was the Temple written into the archives of heaven. But he had also set in motion the forces which would one day pull it down. Was there nothing he could do? The pangs of remorse and regret gnawed at his heart. Was there nothing he could do to undo the damage he'd done?

We can see him open the scroll. It is a copy of the Hebrew hymnbook. In Solomon's day, almost all the psalms bore David's name. It was the voice of his dead father speaking to him from beyond the grave. We can see him running his eye from psalm to psalm until suddenly it is arrested by the word "vanity!" He found that word in what we know as Psalm 39. The word smote him twice:

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth;
and mine age is as nothing before thee:
verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. (v. 5)

To which David added the word "selah," which, translated into our vernacular, simply means, "There, what do you think of it all!" Old age! Vanity! It must have smitten the aging Solomon right between the eyes. Then came the second punch:

When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity,
thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth:
surely every man is vanity. (v. 11)

And, again, there follows that word "selah." "What do you think of that!" The word "vanity" itself refers to that which soon disappears. It embodies the idea of a vapor, something which appears for a little while and then "vanisheth away" (James 4:14). Someone has suggested paraphrasing the idea behind the word as "chasing the wind."

The word David used for "iniquity" must also have troubled Solomon's thoughts. It suggests perverseness, being bent out of shape, and it, too, must have

arrested his attention. Haunted by two words “vanity” and “iniquity,” Solomon sat there and pondered.

It was the word “vanity” that finally gripped him the most. It summed up the course of his life. In his pursuit of knowledge and power, pleasure, and happiness, he had ended up chasing the wind. He had squandered the wisdom given him by God. The light that was in him had been turned into darkness, and how great was that darkness (Matthew 6:23). At last there was a gleam of light in the darkness. He could not change the past, but he could lay hold of the future. He could write another book. He could give his testimony. He could warn young people. He could unmask worldliness and carnality. He could preach! But to preach, he needed a text. He found a text. He found that text already in his hand, a one-word text: Vanity! It so gripped the soul of the repentant Solomon, so summed up what he wanted to say, so well stripped the world of its pretensions that, one way or another, he wrote that word “vanity” some thirty-six times into his sermon. It was his predominating text.

Solomon would remember the first time the thought behind the word occurred in the Scriptures. It was immediately after the fall. God had appeared in the garden to pass judgment on Adam, Eve, and the serpent. But judgment was tempered with mercy, for God promised that “the seed of the woman” would one day “bruise the serpent’s head.” Eve believed God. When her firstborn son arrived she called him Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man from the LORD” or, as some have suggested, “I have gotten a man, even Jehovah” (Genesis 4:1).

The boy began to grow, manifesting the fallen Adamic nature and so much so that by the time Eve’s second son was born, she was so disillusioned that she called him “Abel,” which means “vanity.” So Solomon found his text. He began at once on his topic: man under the sun.

2. The Great Question (1:3)

“What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (1:3). There speaks the businessman. Solomon was a very successful businessman, at least at first. And like all successful businessmen, Solomon kept his eye on his profit and loss statement with special attention directed to what we now call “the bottom line.” For years Solomon had been chairman of the board of a number of commercial enterprises. He knew the importance of making sure that every venture turned a profit. And, like so many others engrossed in turning a profit, Solomon lost sight of eternal values. He was the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21) of the

Old Testament, for toward the end Solomon became interested, in ever-increasing absorption, with things “under the sun.”

He introduces the expression “under the sun” for the first time. Before he is finished, he will write it into this sermon twenty-nine times. Preoccupation with money makes most men materialists. The love of money becomes the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Solomon, pen in hand, suddenly sees where it all ends—money in the bank, influence, power, all kinds of material things—but an empty soul.

Solomon, once he was shocked back into sanity by the pronounced judgment of God on his misspent life, would have appreciated the comment of the modern-day successful business executive who declared, “I have spent all my life climbing the corporate ladder, only to find, when I reached the top, that it was leaning against the wrong wall.” Thus, too, were the sentiments of Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield), the great Victorian empire builder. He said: “Youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret.”

C. The Process (1:4–11)

1. A Frustrating Sequence (1:4–10)

No final answers can be found in the sciences of this life:

a) Anthropology Does Not Have the Answer (1:4a)

“One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh . . .” (1:4a). Solomon now reviews the various sciences in his search for something permanent “under the sun.” He begins with what we call anthropology, the study of man. What impresses him at once is man’s impermanence. Generation after generation, man’s brief tenure on this planet is the most obvious fact of all.

He arrives in successive waves, each wave a generation long but intermingling with the generations immediately behind him. He and his contemporaries have their day. But into the darkness of the tomb they go. Solomon’s generation had just about run its course. New generations were on their way to their cradles. His generation was on its way to its grave. If humanity, the crown of creation, was, metaphorically speaking, a river of life, it presented Solomon with many great mysteries. Where are we going? There are no satisfactory answers “under the sun.” Human philosophies and man-made religions can only guess at the reason for it all. The Word of God alone has the answers.

All about the preacher was the tramp of feet, people coming and going. He could remember the time when he stood in awe of an older generation, as represented by his parents. Then, all his interests were absorbed by his own generation which had come to prominence and power. Now it was fast becoming the past generation. The new generation came in with the tide. It swirled across the sands of time. It grappled with the rocky headlands of the hour, then hurried back into the ocean of eternity, caught away by the ebb. But what was the point of it all? Some generations lasted longer than others. The generations before the flood had lived for hundreds of years, but it was all the same in the end. They died. And, when all was said and done, what was the life span of a Methuselah who lived for nearly a thousand years compared with time itself? And what was time itself compared with all eternity? So much for anthropology and the science of man. Man ended it all as a fossil.

b) Geology Does Not Have the Answer (1:4b)

“. . . *but the earth abideth for ever*” (1:4b) or so it seems when we compare the geological ages with the life span of even the oldest man. The words Solomon used for the expression “forever” can be translated *ages*—“the earth abideth for ages.” And so it does—at least the modern science of geology says it does. Back and back the geologists go.

First is the Quaternary Period which embraces the Glacial Age. Then come the Tertiary Period and the Crustaceous Period. After that the famous Jurassic Period when the dinosaurs are said to have stalked the earth. Back, ever further back, the geologists go—the Permian Age, the Devonian Age, the Silurian and the Ordovician Age, and then the Cambrian Age, the beginning of time of planet earth as conceived by the geologists. Back, in all, some 2,300,000,000 years, they say.

Well, from the standpoint of man “under the sun,” the earth does seem to be virtually ageless. But, once we get our sense of direction, age, and distance from above the sun, the age of the earth is but a matter of moments after all. Change and decay are evident everywhere. And there seated on a throne, high and lifted up, is the eternal, uncreated, self-existing God of the universe—well might Isaac Watts declare,

A thousand ages in thy sight,
Are as an evening gone;

Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.²

“The earth abideth forever!” Not so. It had a beginning. It will have an ending. Genesis tells about its beginning, and Revelation tells about the ending. And a fiery ending it is to be (Revelation 20:10–13). So Solomon will have to look elsewhere for something permanent “under the sun.”

c) Astronomy Does Not Have the Answer (1:5)

“The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose” (1:5). From the standpoint of man on this planet, more restless than anything else, is the sun itself. Day by day it bursts from its bed in the distant east. It climbs to its zenith. It sinks again to rest in the flaming west only to complete the same endless journey day after day, age after age.

The sun so dominated the lives of ancient and primitive people that they worshiped it. All kinds of astronomical data, for instance, were built into the great pyramid of Egypt. The sphinx likewise was made so as to record important astronomical facts. It is oriented perfectly toward due east and is an amazing equinoctial marker. There are four cardinal moments in the year. These are the summer solstice (the longest day in the northern hemisphere), the winter solstice (the shortest day in which the north pole points most directly away from the sun), and the spring and autumn equinoxes (when night and day are of equal length). The sphinx is an equinoctial marker. Its eyes focus on the exact position of sunrise at dawn on the spring equinox.

We cannot wonder that the ancients worshiped the sun. The Egyptian Pharaoh was regarded as the incarnation of Ra, the sun god. In Mexico City today the Metropolitan Cathedral looms over the great central plaza, the Zócalo. A scant block from the cathedral is the site of the Templo Mayor, the main temple and the most important pyramids of the Aztecs, the place where their sanguinary religion reached its grim zenith. The shrines of Tlaloc (god of rain and fertility) and of Huitzilopochtli (god of war) stand side by side. There, too, in front of Huitzilopochtli's shrine, but nearer the edge of the summit, is the sacrificial stone. Here endless streams of victims were laid spread-eagle as their turn came so that the priest could plunge his knife into their chests and tear out their hearts as an offering to the sun. The ancient builders of Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain in Britain were just as fascinated with the sun, and they marked the summer

solstice by placing their gigantic circles and horseshoes of stones so that they were aligned with at least sixteen unique sun and moon positions.

The sun! The solar system! Although just a few specks of cosmic dust in terms of the vastness of space, it is, nevertheless, 50 billion billion times as voluminous as the earth. It is made up of a single star, the sun. It embraces its planets, 181 moons, some 1.1 to 1.9 million asteroids, and about 1 trillion comets. Even so, most of its substance, about 99.86 percent, is located in the sun. The theory is that the sun's gravitational influence reaches to a distance a thousand times farther than the orbit of Pluto, the most distant dwarf planet. The sun's surface is a heavy mass of gases and atomic particles with an average temperature of 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. At its core, hydrogen atoms are fused into helium at a temperature of 25 million degrees Fahrenheit. It has a diameter of 864,000 miles. It weighs 2 billion billion billion tons, and it is all gas—335 quadrillion cubic miles of it. And with all that, the sun is rated by modern astronomers as a fifth-magnitude star, up to 100,000 times fainter than its brightest neighbor in the galaxy which it orbits about once every 200 trillion years.

It is no wonder the ancients worshiped the sun, though they knew very little about it. We are impressed with it ourselves. What impressed Solomon was its unvarying round, rising in the morning, setting in the evening, ruling all our days. It, too, was restless. No wonder everything “under the sun” was restless. Nor has our vast accumulation of facts about the sun diminished by one iota our own restlessness.

d) Meteorology Does Not Have the Answer (1:6)

“The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits” (1:6). The atmosphere broods over all the planet. Like the sea, it has its waves, currents, and tides. The higher we go, the rarer and colder it gets. Ascend three and a half miles, and we leave behind us more than half of the weight of the atmosphere, and the cold is unbearable.

This vast ocean of air has its weight and pressure. At sea level, it presses on us with a force equal to 14.6 pounds per square inch—at 2,000 pounds per square foot and an inconceivable 58,611,548,160 pounds per square mile. On the whole surface of the earth, the air presses on our planet with a weight equal to a lead ball 60 miles in diameter. Or more vividly, the atmospheric pressure on a grown person is no less than 14 tons.

Which brings us to what interested Solomon—the winds. Wind is caused by differences in atmospheric pressure at given places on the globe. When the air in one place is heated by the rays of the sun, it expands and becomes lighter. The surrounding air, which has remained cooler, rushes in, causing the warmer and expanded air to rise. The motion of the colder air is the wind.

All this takes place on a grand scale between the equatorial regions of the planet and those of the poles. The air around the poles is cold and heavy and flows along the earth's surface to the equator. In the torrid zone it becomes heated and ascends to the higher elevations where it flows back over the colder air toward the poles to begin the same cycle over again. Solomon had, at least, a rudimentary knowledge of this.

Of course, many other complicating factors come into play. At certain points in this grand circuit, the air masses are of equal weight and density, and they meet and impede one another. The unequal temperatures of the sea and land, the influence of screening clouds, electrical disturbances, and changes of the seasons produce all kinds of variables.

Along with all this is the wonder of evaporation and condensation. Water in its natural state is 800 times heavier than the atmosphere. Yet, day by day, moisture climbs past the firmament and floats at the rarified altitudes of three to six miles above the land and sea. Water, when it is converted into steam or vapor, occupies a space 1,600 times greater than in its liquid state. It is therefore much lighter than the atmosphere, and so it can soar through the sky.

As water is converted into vapor by heat, by the loss of heat, vapor is reconverted into water and falls back to earth again as precipitation. All this vast machinery functions flawlessly. As great an amount of water daily flows upward by evaporation into the skies as all the rivers of the globe pour into the oceans, a quantity sufficient to cover all the land of the earth to a depth of three feet! This computes to 186,240 cubic miles per annum.

Think of how much heat it takes to boil away a kettle of water, and it will give some idea of the tremendous amount of energy taken up by daily evaporation from the seas.

The science of meteorology is very complex. The television weather channel has made it seem almost humdrum. The weather chart features isobars and barometer readings, centers of high and low pressure, temperatures, fronts, cyclones, anticyclones, and depressions. We know how, where, and why the wind moves. Sophisticated computers assimilate vast amounts of information and give it back in complex weather charts. Solomon would have been fascinated by it all.

However, he grasped the essentials clearly enough. He knew about the major air currents. What depressed him was the fact that it all centered on endless, restless activity which, it seemed to him, illustrated man's own driven movements under the sun. Maybe there was some explanation for all this round of activity. If so, looking at things "under the sun" had eluded him.

e) Oceanography Does Not Have the Answer (1:7)

Solomon turns from the glowing sun and the blowing wind to the flowing sea. *"All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again"* (1:7).

The river Solomon knew best was the Jordan. The valley of the Jordan is a rift more than 160 miles long following one of the major fault lines of the Middle East. This volcanic rift is from two to fifteen miles wide. It falls 1,292 feet below sea level, the bottom of the Dead Sea being deeper still—another 1,300 feet. It begins at the foot of Mount Hermon, near the New Testament city of Caesarea Philippi. It gathers within its embrace two lakes, Hula and Galilee, as it twists and turns, like some writhing serpent, through the tangled hills and thickets sprawled across the landscape. Its bed varies in width from one-fourth of a mile to two miles. It pours its waters, finally, into the arid Dead Sea. It has been calculated that 6.5 million tons of water flow into the Dead Sea daily, mostly from the Jordan River.

Solomon, of course, would be familiar with two of the world's greatest rivers, the Nile and the Euphrates, the eastern and western boundaries of the Promised Land (Genesis 15). Solomon's queen was an Egyptian princess. She probably never tired of telling him about the Nile, the world's longest river, flowing 4,135 miles from the mountains near the equator to the Mediterranean.

But it was the Jordan River that he knew best. He must have often pondered the fact that the Jordan pours its water into the Dead Sea and has no outlet. *Where does all that water go?* must have been Solomon's thought. His comment here suggests that he at least guessed at the fact that it evaporated and returned to its headwaters in the form of rain. Indeed, the evaporation process at the Dead Sea is so extraordinary, caused by the intense heat, that the water left in the Dead Sea contains 25 percent solid substances, notably salt, potash, and bromine. By contrast, the water of the ocean contains only from 4 to 6 percent of solids in solution.

Whether or not Solomon was smart enough to realize that the rivers running into the sea do not cause the oceans to overflow because of evaporation,

he certainly had the gist of it. But again, it was just another of those ceaseless activities “under the sun” that proved his point. Life was a rat race. It was a merry-go-round. And man was part of it, going round and round in circles, not getting anywhere, simply getting older.

f) Sociology Does Not Have the Answer (1:8a)

“All things are full of labour” (1:8a). Man is just another cog in a vast machine. He is caught up in laborious activity, subject to forces and influences over which he has no control. Constant movement grips the universe. There is no rest. It is Work! Work! Work!

Perhaps Solomon was cynically thinking of all the vast levies of able-bodied men drafted by him to slave at the grandiose buildings. It was accepted with good grace by the people so long as the work levies were for the purpose of building the Temple. The Phoenicians provided Solomon with craftsmen and skilled laborers: carvers, stonemasons, dyers, modelers, and such.

The building of the Temple had commenced in the second month of the fourth year of Solomon's reign. The massive timbers were felled and dressed and conveyed in floats to Joppa on the coast and thence to Jerusalem, forty miles away in the mountains. Similarly, magnificent and enormous hewed stones beveled at the edges (some more than thirty feet long by seven and a half high and weighing over one hundred tons) had to be hauled to the site.

There were no modern mechanical appliances. Vast hordes of workmen had to be employed. They amounted to 160,000 laborers, divided into two classes. There were 30,000 native Israelites raised by a “levy.” The Hebrew scholar Alfred Edersheim estimates they comprised 1 out of every 44 able-bodied males. They worked in relays, 10,000 being employed during one month with two months off to pursue their domestic activities. There were an additional draft of 150,000 second-class resident aliens of whom 70,000 were burden bearers and 80,000 “hewers in the mountains” (presumably stonecutters). These men were little more than bond slaves.

It took Solomon seven years to complete the Temple. By then he had cultivated a taste for building. He spent the next thirteen years building his own palace. After that, he turned his workmen to the task of fortifying the nation. It was all done with forced labor, the burden of it falling on the Canaanite inhabitants of his country, his Jewish subjects being chiefly engaged as overseers. But, even so, the division of so much labor and the onerous taxation levied to pay for it

all created enormous hardships. The victims of all this viewed it as a “grievous service” and as a “heavy yoke” (1 Kings 12:4). As Edersheim says, “Solomon’s love of building and of oriental splendor seems to have grown upon him.”³

Nor was there any redress. There were no trade unions, no social workers, no power beyond that of the king, and no higher court than his. Solomon must often have visited the sites of his various building activities and congratulated himself that he was a sovereign not a slave.

When I was in the British Army in Palestine, I was stationed on Haifa Docks. I often saw the impoverished Arab laborers working under just such conditions as Solomon’s workmen. The poor fellows were dressed in old clothes. Their job was to unload the boxcars full of potash from the Dead Sea. Each man carried a sack of chemicals weighing at least 150 pounds. Their backs were bowed beneath the load. As the work proceeded, they built a vast mountain, with steep slopes up one side, to enable them to reach its summit. When the tower was completed they started on another one. When the cargo ships arrived, all these heavy sacks had to be shouldered again and carried down the steep slope, carried to the vessel, and loaded aboard. The men tried to ease their burdens by keeping up a chant. They were allowed an hour at midday to eat a scanty meal, often a piece of pocket bread and a handful of grapes or a slice of watermelon, and time for a brief rest. Then back into the heat of the sun and the endless round of toil.

Such was life “under the sun” for them. And such was the life of toil of Solomon’s workmen. Nor was the lot of the freemen, on their ancestral plots of ground, much lighter labor. It was ceaseless toil in the fields for most of them. Solomon saw it all as part of the inevitable lot of life for the majority “under the sun.” There was no relief for most of them. Nobody cared how hard they had to work, nor how long, nor how badly paid they were, nor how dangerous to life and limb it all was. As for Solomon, he did not lift a finger to relieve their burdens. He had too many grandiose plans for which cheap labor was required.

g) Psychology Does Not Have the Answer (1:8b)

“. . . man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (1:8b). The cause of universal restlessness and dissatisfaction went far deeper than the mere physical. It had its roots in the inner nature of things.

Take the eye, for instance. The eye was made for seeing. Well one would think that when it had seen what it came to see, it would be satisfied. Not a bit of it. It is the inner nature of man which is the trouble. Who, for instance, can

be satisfied with a passing glance at Niagara Falls? In the years I traveled as an itinerant preacher, I often found myself in Ontario. I invariably went in and out of Canada by way of Niagara Falls. On the Canadian side there is a restaurant perched almost on the lip of the falls. One can look up the river, watch it come tumbling over the rocks, sweep around the bend, gather force and speed, and then hurl itself into the seething cauldron below. The eye has seen it time and time again and still wants to see it again.

Way out in the American west, across the badlands to the Black Hills of South Dakota and twenty-five miles from Rapid City, is Mount Rushmore National Memorial. The mountain rises 5,725 feet high and there, carved out of a granite cliff, is one of North America's most impressive sights. It shows the faces of four American Presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. It is enormous, awesome, unforgettable. The head of George Washington alone is as high as a five-story building (about sixty feet). When one sees it for the first time, the eye wants to gaze and gaze. It never gets enough. I have seen it three times and, even at that, would welcome an opportunity to go and see it again. The eye is not satisfied with seeing.

Nor is the ear filled with hearing. Who, having heard Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" for the first time, says, "Once is enough"? We never get tired of hearing our favorite tunes. We record them so that we can hear them over and over again. And the more we hear them, the more we want to hear them. They become old, familiar friends, associated with a hundred memories. Whoever says to his eye, "I have seen all I want to see, I would like to become blind"? Whoever says to his ear, "I have heard it all. Now become stone deaf"? No, indeed! We are grateful that we have two eyes and two ears so that should one or other of them fail us we still have another to carry on.

This ceaseless desire to go on seeing and to go on hearing arrested Solomon. He added it, perversely enough, to his overall complaint. It was just another proof that nothing "under the sun" can satisfy. It is in the very nature of things down here, in the very psychology of our souls that we want more and more of the pleasures of life, and this craving pursues us on into old age and down to the grave itself.

h) Archaeology Does Not Have the Answer (1:9)

"The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (1:9).

Archaeology is the science of digging up the past. The past helps us understand

the present and prepares us for the future. It sheds light on the rise and fall of former civilizations. It helps us understand history. The chief lesson we learn from history is that people are the same now as they were then. We do not learn from our mistakes, the cynic says. “The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.”

Solomon himself was a case in point. The book of Judges should have afforded him an eloquent and sufficient example. It covered a period of four hundred years of comparatively recent Hebrew history. It was an endless round of sin followed by servitude, followed by sorrow, followed by salvation—and then the same dismal round all over again. The Mesopotamians, the Moabites, the Midianites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, and then the oppressive Philistines—all trod the Hebrew people down. Then came the judges Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, along with some half dozen known only by name, with Eli and Godly Samuel bringing up the rear. But from servitude to servitude Israel learned nothing. Over and over again, back they went to serving the vile and vicious gods of the surrounding pagan tribes.

They learned nothing from their history. So it was endlessly repeated. Then David came, a man after God’s own heart. He had subdued all of Israel’s foes. He had established the Hebrew faith and laid up treasure to build its Temple. He had put its archives in order, given it a magnificent hymn book, and founded its Messianic dynasty. He had bequeathed to Solomon an empire which stretched virtually from Egypt to the Euphrates. And what had Solomon learned from all this? Nothing. He himself had groveled at the pagan shrines he had built in Jerusalem for his heathen wives. He had thus paved the way for an eventual return of the nation to the follies of the days of the judges. History had taught him nothing. Or, at least, he had forgotten that history has a way of repeating itself. What had happened before had happened again. Gazing through the mists of the future, Solomon could see the same endless round—sin, servitude, sorrow, salvation—over and over again. Revival, when it came, rarely lasted more than a generation.

It was another discordant note in his dirge of despair with life “under the sun.” Indeed, it was only when a prophet, priest, or king came along, with his head above the sun, that history took a positive turn.

i) Philosophy Does Not Have the Answer (1:10)

“Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us” (1:10).

Solomon was bored to tears. We are reminded of the Greeks of Athens, the city of Socrates, of Plato, Demosthenes, Pericles, and Solon, where almost everyone in philosophy worthy of the name was born. Here sculpture had reached the apex of its glory. Here, oratory had surpassed itself. Here flourished a knowledge of everything worth knowing “under the sun.” But what struck Paul most about the Athenians was their stupidity. It expressed itself in crass idolatry, in graven images and gods with eyes that could not see and mouths that could not speak. Here stood temples to Apollo, Hercules, Aphrodite, Vulcan, and Mars. The Athenians knew everything about everything, except God. Him they did not know.

These, the Athenians of Paul’s day, the philosophers of Mars Hill, lived for one thing only—to find something new under the sun. There before these men stood a nondescript Jew, the greatest intellectual of them all. They called him a “babbler,” literally a *seed-picker*, one whose knowledge consisted of odd scraps of information picked up here, there, and everywhere. They wanted to hear “some new thing,” and Paul set it before them—Jesus Christ raised from the dead. And, for the most part, they mocked. For Athens had become the home of diletantism, the shrine of a critical spirit which found all things wanting, the arena where all was looked upon as food for clever argument.⁴

Solomon bestows a similar attitude. He was bored to tears by life “under the sun.”

2. A Frustrated Sequel (1:11)

a) The Frustrating Incompleteness of Our History Books (1:11a)

In summing up this opening statement of his, on the pointlessness of life “under the sun,” Solomon draws attention to the frustrating incompleteness of our history books: “*There is no remembrance of former things,*” he says (1:11a). There are vast gaps in our knowledge of the past. The sum total of what we know is fragmentary at best. Our knowledge of the past resembles a child’s scrapbook in which are preserved bits and pieces of knowledge. This is true not only of history but also of science, even to this day.

Isaac Newton, for instance, worked out the laws of motion and gravity and invented calculus. His findings ruled scientific thought for two centuries. Yet he said of himself, “I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”⁵

But it is in the realm of history that we become most quickly aware of the gaps in our knowledge. Who, for instance, built the pyramids? Who really killed John Kennedy? How advanced was the antediluvian civilization? There are thousands of such questions relating to the larger issues of time. But what about the teeming millions who have peopled the planet and whose names and deeds have been forgotten by one and all? Once in a while a name surfaces in connection with some event or some discovery, but for the most part, people live and die, they are buried, and they are soon forgotten. An afternoon's walk through an old graveyard will soon convince us that Solomon was right. "There is no remembrance of former things."

b) The Frustrating Inference of Our History Books (1:11b)

Based on this observation, Solomon draws attention to another one, to the frustrating inference of our history books: ". . . *neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after*" (1:11b). What makes us think that our names will stand the test of time? All too often those who make the headlines today are forgotten as quickly as they rise to prominence. Who, for instance, invented the first practical typewriter or air conditioner or the first electron microscope? Or who, for instance, was Louis W. Parker? Or who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938? Indeed, fame tends to be short lived.

So then, Solomon began his sermon on a sour note. Nothing seemed worth even the strum of a single string. Life kept one on the move. Solomon would have appreciated the complaint of poor Joe in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. A policeman had found Joe, the crossing sweeper, loitering, and he ordered him to move on. The following dialogue took place:

"I'm always a-moving on, sir," cries the boy, wiping away his grimy tears with his arm. "I've always been a-moving and a-moving on, ever since I was born. Where can I possible move to, sir, more nor I do move." . . .

"My instructions don't go to that," replies the constable. "My instructions are that this boy is to move on."⁶

Like the poor crossing sweeper, Solomon, prince of the realm that he was, found that life kept moving him on. It had moved him on at such a pace and with such purpose that he was soon to be ushered out of life altogether. It was one of the things he had against life "under the sun."

He had been kept “a-moving and a-moving on” ever since he was born. And all to very little purpose. Truly life “under the sun,” though it offered him what it offered to comparatively few—fame and fortune, pleasure and power—had tricked him in the end. For years, he had been too busy to bother about God. How history and posterity would view him seemed to trouble him most. As for the immediate future, he had a fool for a son, and he knew it. It would not take empty-headed young Rehoboam long to squander the kingdom, the power, and the glory that Solomon would hand on to him. Such a thought might sour any man’s soul.