Ecclesiastes 1:2: Vanity of Vanities, All Is Vanity



Foreword: Vanity of vanities! All is Vanity”

Ecclesiastes begins with a powerful statement from the Preacher: “Vanity of vanities… Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (**Ecclesiastes 1:2)**. The book is written as if by Solomon near the end of his life, after he had experienced great wealth, wisdom, pleasure, and success. In it, he carefully examines every major human pursuit—things people chase “under the sun”—and repeatedly concludes that they are empty. The Hebrew word for “vanity” is hebel, which means something like vapor, breath, or mist. It describes what is temporary and ultimately unsatisfying.

“Vanity” here speaks of emptiness. It wastes life without purpose or goal.

The Hebrew word *hebel* (translated as “vanity”) describes something that is empty, temporary, and ultimately unsatisfying. It is the opposite of anything solid or lasting. The Preacher looks at the world around him—the sun rising and setting, rivers flowing into the sea, and one generation following another—and sees the same pattern in human life. When people’s work is disconnected from God, it becomes part of that endless, circular cycle (**Ecclesiastes 1:3–11**).

A life spent chasing experiences, possessions, or status that disappear at death is, in this sense, wasted. True purpose needs a goal that lasts beyond death and beyond the fading of our names. Without that kind of lasting purpose, even the busiest and most energetic life remains empty—like chasing the wind (**Ecclesiastes 1:14**).

All worldly pursuits are purposeless

In Ecclesiastes chapters 1 and 2, the Preacher examines the main things people seek for meaning, and he finds that each falls short. Wisdom is better than foolishness, yet both the wise and the

foolish end up with the same fate (**2:12–16**). Pleasure, big projects, beautiful gardens, and great wealth can bring temporary enjoyment, but they never fully satisfy the heart (**2:1–11**). Hard work produces nothing that can be taken beyond the grave, and what a person builds is often left to others who did not earn it (**2:18–21**). Even the desire for justice is frustrated when the righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper (**3:16; 8:14**).

These are not the words of someone who never tried these things. They come from a man who tested every major earthly pursuit and found that none could answer the deeper question of why any of it ultimately matters. When worldly goals become the highest purpose of life, they remain empty because they end at the grave and leave the soul unchanged.

"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" is life without God.

The phrase "**under the sun**" shows the limits of the Preacher's experiment. Without God, the conclusion is complete: all is vanity. The book does not say that food, work, or friendship are bad things (**2:24; 3:12–13; 9:7–10**). Instead, it shows that these good things become empty when they are separated from the God who gives them.

Life lived without the Creator is a closed circle. Everything ends the same way: the body returns to dust, and the spirit returns to God, but nothing remains as a lasting record of what the life truly accomplished (**12:7**). The strong claim "**all is vanity**" does not mean creation itself is worthless. It judges a life lived on purpose apart from God. Without the fear of the Lord, every achievement collapses into emptiness.

Why God Created Us:
So Every Person Can Choose to Accept or Reject Christ.

The Bible places the human story inside God's larger purpose. Christ created all things and made them for Christ (**Colossians 1:16**). People were made in the image of God to know Him, yet they were also given the ability to reject that knowledge. The fall showed that this ability was real. Through Jesus' coming and His death for sin, God opened the way again for people to be restored to Him.

From the standpoint of God's plan of salvation, creation includes a real choice set before every person: to receive the life offered in Jesus or to remain in the emptiness Ecclesiastes describes. **John 3:16–18** presents this clear alternative—belief that leads to eternal life, or unbelief that remains under judgment.

The Preacher's verdict that "**all is vanity**" describes the path of those who reject God's offer. The gospel announces that the same Creator who allowed creation to experience futility has also provided the way for its redemption (**Romans 8:20–21**). Creation's goal is not automatic glory for everyone, but the free and responsible response of people made in God's image.

How the Bible Shows Us How to Live a Purposeful Life

The rest of the Bible gives the positive answer to Ecclesiastes' warning about emptiness. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (**Proverbs 1:7**) and the whole duty of every person (**Ecclesiastes 12:13**). Jesus stated the same priority in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" **(Matthew 6:33**).

Real purpose is not something we invent for ourselves. It comes from lining up our lives with what God has revealed in His Word. Clear signs of this kind of life include:

- Trusting Jesus to restore us to a right relationship with the Father (**John 14:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21**).
- Treating our daily work, relationships, and possessions as things God has entrusted to us, rather than as the main goals of life (**Colossians 3:23–24**).
- Measuring success by faithfulness to God rather than by results seen in this life (**1 Corinthians 4:2; Matthew 25:21**).
- Living with the hope of the resurrection, knowing that work done for the Lord is never wasted (**1 Corinthians 15:58**).

When these priorities guide a person's life, the everyday activities that Ecclesiastes called empty—eating, drinking, and finding joy in work—become good gifts again. People receive them with thankfulness instead of treating them as substitutes for God.

Conclusion

Ecclesiastes 1:2 is the necessary preface to every human ambition. It declares that a life organized around anything less than God is vapor. The diagnosis is severe because the alternative is decisive: creation exists so that each soul may accept or deny the Christ through whom and for whom all things were made. Scripture does not leave the reader in the cycle of meaninglessness. It summons the heart to fear the Lord, to seek His kingdom first, and to labor in the confidence that what is done in Christ will stand when every "under the sun" achievement has passed away.

"Vanity of vanities" is not the end of the story. It clears away false hopes so we can see the only life that is truly full.