

## Same Old, Same Old – Ecclesiastes 1:3-11

**Main Idea:** Modern societal issues are a repackaged version of an ancient lie.

### **I. What is the Point? | Ecclesiastes 1:3-11**

**Ecclesiastes reads as a reflective warning from a man who tasted the fullness of worldly success but found it ultimately empty when lived apart from the fear of the Lord.** After introducing himself as the author (v.1), Solomon pronounces the statement that serves as the thesis driving force through which the whole book stems from— a sobering declaration: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). The word translated “vanity” is the Hebrew word *hevel*, which literally means “air,” “vapor” or “breath”. It communicates something fleeting, insubstantial, and impossible to grasp. Throughout the book, Solomon isn’t venting frustration; he’s offering a warning: learn from my life and don’t go down the same path. In other words, **without God at the center, everything is futile, it bears no spiritual meaning, and I produced no eternal fruit.** Following his declaration that “all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2), **Solomon presses further with a haunting question: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:3).** Here, the Hebrew words deepen its meaning — *’ādām* (man, sons of Adam) emphasizes humanity in its earthly frailty, while *yoter* (gain) speaks of real advantage or profit, a commercial term highlighting tangible benefit. The toil (*amal*) refers to labor, earnings, or wealth. **The phrase “under the sun” (*taḥat ha-shemesh*) is Solomon’s code for life on earth—a purely horizontal, earthly perspective that excludes the heavenly or eternal.** This question is a “curse-filled” one, reflecting life as experienced by sinners, where toil is disconnected from God’s eternal purpose. **Solomon’s aim is to expose the vanity and futility of life without God first so that what is truly meaningful and eternal can shine forth.**

**According to Solomon, the problem is not the act of working itself but the purpose behind our work.** In modern American culture, shaped by the ideals of the so-called “American Dream,” work and success are often idolized as ultimate goals. **From a young age, people are conditioned to equate their worth with productivity, career success, and material gain, believing there is nothing they cannot achieve if they work hard enough.** Yet this cultural mindset often leaves souls starved, endlessly scavenging for satisfaction in external achievements, and lives marked by collecting goods that can never be fully enjoyed. Success is measured by visible gain instead of character or eternal fruit, and legacy is sought in fading earthly accomplishments instead of lasting hope in God. **The moment work becomes a means to self-fulfillment rather than service to God and others; idolatry has crippled into the heart of man.** By contrast, Scripture offers a profoundly different view of work. Psalm 128 blesses the God-fearing man who walks in God’s ways and enjoys the fruit of his labor to provide for his family. His prosperity is not mere worldly success but a reflection of God’s blessing upon one who fears the Lord. The flourishing of Jerusalem and the blessings upon children and grandchildren in the psalm underscore how godly work benefits not only the individual but society as a whole. **Work itself is not the problem; rather, it becomes an issue when it turns into the ultimate goal or source of meaning in life.** Similarly, money or material wealth is not inherently wrong, but when the “mighty dollar” quietly climbs the throne of the human heart, it becomes a dangerous idol. In our culture, money often shapes decisions, defines worth, and dictates priorities, promising fulfillment but delivering only anxiety and unrest.

### **To Ponder:**

1. What does it mean practically to align our work with “God’s eternal, heavenly purposes” rather than just earthly gain?
2. How can we guard against making work a source of identity or self-worth instead of a means to provide for our needs and serve God?

Solomon then turns to a poetic description of cycles of nature and life to illustrate his point, “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (Eccl. 1:4). **Through recurring imagery—common in ancient Hebrew poetry to emphasize truth—Solomon underscores the unchanging order of creation under God’s sovereign control.** The contrast between fleeting human life and the enduring earth underscores the brevity of our existence. The sun, wind, and water cycles (Eccl. 1:5-7) further emphasize creation’s repetitive, unchanging rhythms.

**The sun rises and sets, the wind whirls, and rivers flow endlessly into the sea—yet none of these cycles reach fulfillment.** Similarly, human labor, innovations, and desires are trapped in the same futility, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it" (Eccl. 1:8). The human soul, wired for eternity, is exhausted by the unfulfilling nature of life under the sun. The Preacher's observation that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9) is not a denial of any need for technological or political progress but a lament over the unchanging condition of the human heart. **History repeats itself because humanity, apart from redemption, remains enslaved to the same sins, cravings, and disillusionments.** Even our longing for legacy is futile: "There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be" (Eccl. 1:11).

**Idolatry happens when even good things become THE thing—when what should be a blessing becomes an object of worship.** Romans 1:25 reminds us that exchanging the truth about God for worship of creation leads to spiritual ruin. Jesus' parable of the rich fool in echoes this danger, warning that life does not consist in abundance of possessions (Lk. 12:15-21). The rich man's focus on building bigger barns for his wealth reveals the folly of placing security and identity in labor or material things rather than in God, who alone grants lasting significance and peace. Instead, **Scripture calls believers to a different posture toward work. Our faithfulness to God must shape how we view and engage in our labor, not the accolades or wealth that might come from it.** In American culture, identity is often wrapped up in career titles and achievements. But what happens when those are lost—through layoffs, retirement, or failure? **The answer Solomon and Scripture give is that work is a gift from God, not God itself.** Our true identity and worth rest in Him, not in our productivity or income. We are called to value faithfulness over status and to find our significance in serving the Lord rather than in worldly success. As we face our daily labor, may we seek to align our hearts with God's eternal purposes, resisting the idols of money, status, or achievement, and embracing the joy of serving Him in all we do.

#### **To Ponder:**

3. How does the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:15-21) challenge common cultural views about success and security?
4. In what ways can work and money become idols in our lives, even if they are not inherently wrong?

In verses 8-11, Solomon paints a vivid picture of life's endless weariness and insatiable appetite, "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (v.8-9). Solomon writes, capturing the restless human desire for originality and fulfillment. **Every generation believes it is breaking fresh ground, but in truth, most ideas are recycled from ancient philosophies and worldviews. The secular humanism, sexual liberation, and self-centered spirituality prevalent today are repackaged versions of old pagan lies.** As the apostle Paul observed in Acts 17:21, people often spend their time chasing the latest ideas, unaware they are simply dancing with old deceptions in new costumes. These ancient lies take many modern forms. The temptation to "be your own god" echoes the serpent's deception in Genesis 3:5, now repackaged as "live your truth" or "follow your heart." Moral relativism, the denial of accountability, mirrors the fool's heart described in Psalm 10, now reframed as "do whatever makes you happy." Social media's craving for approval parallels King Saul's fear of man in 1 Samuel 15. Religious hypocrisy, where sin is minimized despite outward worship, mirrors Israel's disobedience in Jeremiah's day (Jer. 7). Even the idea of a "culture of tolerance" that demands unity without truth recalls Jeremiah's false prophets promising peace without peace (Jer. 6). **These cyclical errors underscore the timelessness of human folly and the desperate need for the Gospel's true wisdom. In describing the unchanging truth of the Gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ asked:** "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). Unlike the empty promises of worldly success, Jesus offers purpose that transcends the weariness of life under the sun. **Jesus, the true and better Solomon (Matt. 12:42), brings a lasting hope that infuses our earthly toil with eternal meaning.** Through His perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection, our labor in the Lord is never wasted (1 Cor. 15:58). In Him alone do we find satisfaction that the eye and ear cannot satisfy, breaking the cycle of vanity with eternal truth.

#### **To Ponder:**

5. Why do you think ancient lies keep resurfacing in new cultural forms? How can recognizing the ancient roots of these issues help Christians respond more effectively today?