



World Christian Fellowship

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The Smoke and the Mirror

All Is Vanity — Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

♦ The Hamster Wheel Never Stops — Unless You Step Off

In 2019, a senior partner at one of Wall Street's most prestigious law firms **Goldman Sachs'** top lawyer, Kathryn Ruemmler published a resignation letter that went viral.

After 22 years, she had billed over **50,000 hours** — more than five years of continuous work. She wrote: *'I have spent two decades being maximally efficient. I have never once asked whether the maximum efficiency was pointed at the right target.'*

The Preacher would have recognised her instantly. He had the same realisation — from a throne room, not an office cubicle.

The question is not 'How productive am I?'

The question is: 'At the end of all this productivity, what do I actually have?'

The Preacher asked it with the full resources of an empire. His answer is the most important thing you will read this week.

I. The Opening Shock — Thesis before the Argument.

According to Jewish tradition and biblical scholars, King Solomon is believed to have written Ecclesiastes in his **old age**. Because he became king in his youth (around age 20) and reigned for 40 years, he is estimated to have been in his **late 50s to early 60s** near the end of his life around **935–931 BCE**.

Ecclesiastes 1:1–2, *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* ² *“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”*

The Preacher does not ease you in. There is no preamble, no context-setting, no gentle introduction. He opens with what commentators call a double superlative the Hebrew grammatical form for the absolute maximum.

'Vanity of vanities' does not mean 'quite vain' or 'fairly empty.' It means: the most utterly, completely, comprehensively vain thing imaginable.

Consider what this means. This is not a despairing radical writing from a place of defeat.

This is the richest, wisest, most powerful man of his age writing from the summit of everything the ancient world could offer and

declaring with absolute conviction: it is all breath. All vapour. All smoke.

Why does God place these words at the opening of a canonical book?

Because the honest diagnosis always precedes the genuine cure.

The doctor who tells you what you want to hear instead of what is true is no doctor. The Preacher is the most honest doctor in the canon. He will not prescribe until the disease is clearly named.

James 4:14, *"Whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away."*

James, writing in the New Testament uses the identical metaphor. He is not quoting Ecclesiastes directly, but he is breathing the same theological air.

The brevity of human life is not a peripheral observation. It is a central truth that should reorder every priority, every investment of time, every use of the one life we have been given.

*The opening declaration 'Vanity of vanities' is not a counsel of despair it is a gift of liberation.
When the Preacher tells you that everything 'under the sun' is vapour, he is freeing you from the exhausting, futile project of trying to make vapour into something solid.*

You were never going to build a permanent dwelling out of smoke. Now that you know it, you can stop trying and start building on what is actually solid.

The Hebrew title for the Preacher is **‘Qohelet’** from a root meaning ‘to assemble’ or ‘to convene.’ It likely describes his role: one who gathers the community to address them, or one who has gathered a lifetime of observation into a single verdict. Every word that follows has been earned, not theorised.

1 Kings 4:20–25, *"Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and rejoicing... So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms... and they had peace on every side all around him."*

This is the resume behind the verdict.

Solomon is not writing from lack. He commanded an empire at the height of its security, wealth, and cultural achievement.

The closest thing the ancient world had to unlimited resources for the pursuit of meaning. He tried the experiment so you would not have to. He had every tool and still arrived at ‘vanity of vanities.’

II. The Most Important Commercial Question Ever Asked?

Ecclesiastes 1:3, *"What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun?"*

The Hebrew word for 'profit' here is **yitron** — a term from the world of commerce meaning net gain, surplus, the amount left over after all costs have been subtracted.

The Preacher is applying a rigorous accounting standard to the whole of human life.

What is the net gain?

What do you actually have at the end, after subtracting the cost of all the effort?

This is the question no one wants to ask.

We measure gross output. How much we have earned, achieved, built, accomplished?

We rarely calculate net gain.

What we possess at the end of the ledger after the costs of time, health, relationship, and ultimately death have been subtracted.

The Preacher forces the calculation.

Luke 12:20–21, *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' ²¹ 'So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.'"*

Jesus' parable of the rich fool is the most precise New Testament commentary on **Ecclesiastes 1:3**.

The man had maximised his gross output bigger barns, greater stored wealth. But God introduces the ultimate cost that the man had not factored into his ledger.

'This night your soul will be required of you.'

Net gain: zero.

Because the only thing that crosses the ledger into eternity is what is 'rich toward God.'

Yitron — net profit can only be measured against the ultimate standard.

What survives the night when the soul is required. Everything else is a temporary holding, not a permanent possession.

◆ The Billable Hour and the Empty Ledger

A **2022** survey of senior professionals across law, finance, and medicine found that those who had reached the very top of their fields partners, managing directors, department chairs reported the highest rates of the question:

‘Was it worth it?’

Not the mid-career strivers. The arrivers.

This is precisely the Preacher’s pattern. The question of yitron does not get easier to avoid as you succeed it gets louder. The

summit is where the accounting finally comes due, because it is the only place left to stand and look back at the whole climb.

III. Four Cycles that Reveal the Cosmic Truth.

Ecclesiastes 1:4–7, *"One generation passes away and another generation comes; But the earth abides forever. ⁵The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose. ⁶The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit. ⁷All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; To the place from which the rivers come, There they return again."*

The Preacher draws four images from nature.

- Generations,
- the sun,
- the wind, and
- water.

Each one makes the same point from a different angle.

- The natural world operates in cycles of enormous energy that produce no net change.
- The sun rises and sets and rises and sets, expending its energy, going nowhere.
- The wind blows south, then north, completing its circuit, arriving nowhere.

- The rivers pour themselves endlessly into the sea that is never filled.

These are **not** images of futility in the sense of worthlessness. The sun, the wind, and the water are all essential, all beautiful, all powerful.

What the Preacher is observing is their circularity. The fact that all this energy and movement does not produce progress toward a destination. It is perpetual motion without a goal, without an end that gives the motion its meaning.

Romans 8:22, *"For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now."*

Paul's diagnosis in **Romans 8** illuminates the Preacher's observation: creation is 'groaning.'

The cycles the Preacher describes are not the cycles of a creation operating at its designed peak, they are the cycles of a creation 'subjected to futility' (**Romans 8:20**).

The relentless, destination-less cycling is the sound of a creation longing for liberation. And Paul gives us the hope that Ecclesiastes only glimpses: *'the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption'* (**Romans 8:21**).

The created order that the Preacher observes with such precision is not the creation God originally made but it is the creation under the curse. The cycles of futility are the symptom of a world waiting for redemption.

When the Preacher writes these words, he is unknowingly prophesying: the creation is groaning for a liberator. Three thousand years later, Paul tells us the liberator's name.

◆ The Algorithm That Never Arrives

Every social media feed is engineered on the same principle as the rivers running into the sea. **It is designed to be scrolled, not finished.**

There is no bottom to reach, no final post that satisfies the appetite that opened the app in the first place only the next thing, and the next, cycling exactly like the wind that *‘whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit’ (1:6).*

The average person unlocks their phone over one hundred times a day. That is not a design flaw. It is the entire business model motion without destination, monetised.

IV. The Architecture of Insatiable Desire.

Ecclesiastes 1:8–9, *"All things are full of labour; Man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing. ⁹That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun."*

'The eye is not satisfied with seeing.'

This is the Preacher's most precise description of human desire, and it is a description of structural insatiability.

The eye is not broken. It functions perfectly. It sees. It receives. And then it wants more.

The ear hears everything it is exposed to and immediately orients itself toward the next sound.

This is not a psychological problem that can be corrected with better habits. It is the architecture of fallen desire.

Saint Augustine described it as *the restless heart*.

The heart that is restless until it rests in God is not merely emotionally unsettled. It is ontologically incomplete, because it has been separated from the only Source that could satisfy it.

John 4:13–14, *"Jesus answered and said to her, 'Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.'"*

Jesus at the well of Sychar is commenting directly on **Ecclesiastes 1:8**.

The water of this world, every earthly source of satisfaction, produces thirst again. It is the architecture of insatiability perfectly illustrated.

But Jesus introduces a category that the Preacher could only point toward: water that produces an internal spring, a self-replenishing fountain.

The eye that has seen Jesus does not simply want more of what it has seen but it has received a source of seeing that overflows. This is the New Testament fulfilment of what Ecclesiastes diagnoses as the incurable disease of earthly desire.

'There is nothing new under the sun'

This is not a statement about technological stagnation.

It is a statement about human nature. Every generation rediscovers the same temptations, commits the same errors, reaches the same conclusions.

The technology changes but the heart does not.

This is why every generation needs the same gospel: not a new message, but the ancient answer to the ancient hunger.

V. The Illusion of Novelty.

Ecclesiastes 1:10, *"Is there anything of which it may be said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been in ancient times before us."*

The Preacher anticipates an objection before it is even raised. He can hear someone in the crowd already pushing back: *‘But surely THIS is new. I have seen something under the sun that has never existed before.’*

V 10 is that objection, quoted and then dismantled. The Preacher does not argue the point abstractly. He puts the claim on trial: name it. Bring forward your candidate for genuine novelty. Whatever you produce, he answers, ‘it has already been in ancient times before us.’ The appearance of newness is simply forgetfulness wearing a fresh coat.

◆ The Metaverse and the Magic Mirror

In **2021**, entire industries reorganised around a supposedly revolutionary concept: the **‘metaverse’** a persistent, immersive digital world where people would live, work, and socialise. Headlines called it the next chapter of human civilisation.

But the word itself was thirty years old, coined by novelist Neal Stephenson in 1992. And the longing behind it the desire for an alternate, more perfect world entered through a portal is older still.

Medieval cathedrals were built as immersive alternate realities. **Plato’s cave**, written **twenty-four centuries earlier**, describes people mistaking shadows on a wall for the substance of reality itself.

Every generation manufactures its own mirror and calls the reflection new. The technology changes. The wardrobe changes. The ache being fed by it does not.

Isaiah 43:18–19, *"Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it?"*

Here is the tension that makes the Bible more than an echo of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher, restricted to what happens 'under the sun,' can only report a closed system: no new thing arises from within it. Isaiah speaks from outside the system. God does not recycle the past, but He interrupts it.

2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."*

This is the only exception the universe has ever produced to **Ecclesiastes 1:10**.

Not a new gadget, a new fashion, a new political theory all of those remain trapped 'under the sun,' recycled endlessly.

But a person united to Christ becomes something the sun has never seen before, because the change originates from above the sun, not within its cycle.

Every innovation you have ever been sold as 'the next big thing' is old wine in a new bottle because everything manufactured under the sun must, by definition, already be under the sun.

True newness cannot be engineered. It can only be received from the One who stands outside the cycle He created.

***Revelation 21:5** ends the whole story with the only advertisement in history that will not disappoint: 'Behold, I make all things new.'*

VI. The Final Erasure — Forgotten by the World.

Ecclesiastes 1:11, *"There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those who will come after."*

The final devastation: ***legacy itself is hebel.***

You will be forgotten. This is not merely true statistically it is true even for the great.

Go to any cemetery and find the graves of people who, in their time, were significant, admired, feared. The inscriptions are worn away.

No one remembers.

The Preacher is forcing you to sit with the most uncomfortable truth about the investment you are making in your reputation, even if you succeed completely, the success will be forgotten.

Hebrews 11:4, *"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks."*

But Hebrews offers the extraordinary exception.

Abel is dead and still speaks.

Why?

Not because the world remembered him.

Because God remembered him.

The things done in faith and offered to God have a permanence that the world's memory cannot give and the world's forgetfulness cannot take away.

The antidote to **V 11** is not fame but it is faithfulness before the One who never forgets.

VII. Designed for dissatisfaction.

Here is the transforming revelation that **Ecclesiastes 1** contains for the honest reader.

God designed human beings to be dissatisfied with everything less than Himself.

Not as a punishment but as a mercy.

Every time you have chased something promising, a promotion, a relationship, an achievement, a pleasure and found it hollow, that hollowness was not failure.

It was a signpost.

The void in the centre of human experience is not a malfunction. It is a homing signal.

The Preacher has done you the enormous favour of following every possible signal to its destination and mapping each one as a dead end.

Not so that you give up. So that when you finally follow the one signal that leads somewhere, you can do so with clarity, conviction, and the full evidence of your own experience supporting the conclusion.

***Ecclesiastes 1** is God saying: I know you have been trying everything else. I designed it to fail. Not because I am cruel, but because I am the only destination that does not disappoint.*

*The eye that is never satisfied with seeing is being prepared for a vision that will satisfy it completely — the beatific vision of God Himself (**1 John 3:2**: 'We shall see Him as He is').*

Every unfulfilled desire in your life is advance payment on that moment.

Conclusion.

♦ The Explorer Who Never Stopped — Ernest Shackleton.

Ernest Shackleton made three expeditions to **Antarctica**, survived the most famous maritime disaster of the Heroic Age of Exploration when his ship **Endurance** was crushed by pack ice, led his crew across **800 miles** of the most treacherous ocean on earth in a lifeboat, climbed an unmapped glacier in **South Georgia**, and rescued every single man.

He died on his fourth Antarctic expedition, in **1922, at 47**.

His wife **Emily** wrote in her diary: *'He died at sea, which was the only place he truly lived. I knew from the day I married him that he was not built for land. He was built for the searching. And he never stopped.'*

Shackleton is the secular Ecclesiastes.

Brilliant, brave, relentlessly driven, chasing the next horizon and never finding the rest he was looking for.

Augustine could have written his epitaph: 'Our heart is restless, until it rests in Thee.'

***Ecclesiastes 1** is the invitation to stop running and to name what you are running toward. The restlessness is real. The answer is not more running. It is the rest that only God provides not because you have stopped searching, but because you have found the One who was always at the end of the search.*

QUESTIONS

Question	Focus
The Preacher asks, ' What profit has a man from all his labour? ' Apply the yitron (net gain) calculation to your current primary investment of time and energy. What is your net gain?	Personal accounting, honest and specific.
The eye is never satisfied with seeing. Where in your life is this most clearly true? What are you consuming more of but finding less satisfaction in?	Application to contemporary digital consumption, social media, entertainment.
Jesus offers water that produces an internal spring (John 4:14). How does this promise change the way you understand the insatiability that Ecclesiastes 1:8 describes?	Bridge to the gospel, the New Testament answer to the Old Testament diagnosis.
'There is no remembrance of former things' (1:11) — yet Hebrews says Abel 'still speaks.'	Eternal significance vs. temporal fame.

Question

Focus

What is the difference between the legacy the world provides and the legacy that God keeps?

The creation is 'groaning' (**Romans 8:22**) it is not operating at its designed capacity.

How does this change how you read the futility cycles of **Ecclesiastes 1:4–7**?

Theological deepening — the creation is not broken; it is captive.