

## 3.

## I. INVESTIGATION AND INFORMATION ABOUT ALL THAT IS DONE UNDER THE SUN IS VANITY Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

- A. *I the Proclaimer am king over Israel in Jerusalem, and I have applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under the heavens (1:12-13)*
1. *God has given this unhappy occupation to the sons of men to work on (1:13b)*
  2. *I have seen all the doings that are done under the sun, and behold all is vanity and grabbing at the wind (1:14-15)*
    - a. *What is crooked cannot become straight (1:15a)*
    - b. *And what is lacking cannot be counted (1:15b)*
- B. *I spoke to myself, saying, "I have accomplished great things, and I have increased information above all who were before me over Jerusalem, and my mind has observed information and knowledge" (1:16-18).*
1. *I set my mind to knowing information and to knowing madness and folly (1:17a).*
  2. *I know that this also is grabbing at the wind (1:17b-18),*
    - a. *For in much information is much frustration (1:18a),*
    - b. *And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (1:18b)*

The first human accomplishment that Solomon mentioned as futile and empty was conducting investigations to gain information about all that people were doing around the world. He said he sought to use wise or intelligent means of gaining practical information about life everywhere under the heavens. Scholars have said that in this section Solomon was discussing wisdom. No doubt, they reached that conclusion because they are in the business of learning and sharing wisdom. Wisdom is their primary interest, so they expect that Solomon had the same primary interest. Solomon was greatly interested in wisdom, but in this section of his book he emphasized something else. He plainly wrote that he was concerned with exploring the works with which men were occupied throughout the world. He said he wanted to use wisdom as he made his investigations and do them well, but his interest was in defining or explaining wisdom. He was interested in making practical surveys and reliable investigations into how people lived and worked in all parts of the world. From that information, he hoped to gain insights, solutions, and benefits that he could apply to his nation.

Solomon discussed his conclusions from his investigations in two sections. In each section, he emphasized the thoroughness and reliability of his

investigations, and in each section he gave his reasons for concluding that all he had learned from them was "*vanity, grabbing at the wind.*"

**Verses 12-15.** *His surveys had revealed no answers to the world's problems.* Solomon began his discussion of this topic by citing his credentials for making his investigations. He claimed to have expertise in the subject because he was king in Jerusalem and because he applied his mind diligently to the task.

When Solomon asserted that he was king in Jerusalem, he used the perfect state of the verb "to be." Some interpreters have latched on to the writer's use of the perfect state to say that he spoke of Solomon's kingship as a thing of the past and, therefore, the writer had to be someone who wrote after Solomon's death. That argument holds no weight, because Hebrew verb forms do not contain time significance. The perfect state indicates completed action, but that action can be in the past, present, or future. Solomon used the perfect state to assert that he was the established king in Jerusalem and therefore was fully able to conduct a thorough investigation.

Solomon also emphasized that he had applied his mind to the surveys, which resulted in his using

the best methods and the most dependable means available both in gathering the information and also in analyzing the data he gained. His investigations were not sloppily or hastily done. He had concentrated his mind on making the most thorough and accurate investigations possible.

Then Solomon hastened on to present the disappointing conclusion he had reached from his surveys. He said he had learned that everywhere conditions were the same as at home. People were occupied with unhappy busy-work that God had given people to do but that was accomplishing nothing truly meaningful or lasting.

Solomon insisted that his conclusion was not based on insufficient data. In his investigations he had seen "*all the doings that are done under the sun.*" He could not have meant he or his agents had seen every person and every act everywhere. He meant he had received information about every type of lifestyle and every kind of work that people could possibly be involved in. He had not limited his investigations to one type of people, one social class, or one kind of occupation. He had made a thorough survey of all levels of society and all nations around him. In doing so, he was not seeking for philosophical theories or intellectual rationalizations. He was looking for practical information about what was being done and about what could be done in the world. Yet, all he had learned was vanity and emptiness. People everywhere were busy traveling on a dead end road.

Solomon gave two reasons for his conclusion. (1) Wherever his surveys uncovered deeds or conditions that were crooked, they could not be straightened. (2) Wherever his surveys discovered that people's basic needs were lacking, the needs not only could not be met, they could not even be counted or catalogued. In other words, the problems were too big to be fixed and the needs were too great to be analyzed. People were just busy struggling away at life, without ever being able to overcome their problems or meet their basic needs. Investigating needs and gaining information were vain and empty enterprises, because they provided no insight into how to improve people's lives in the world.

**Verses 16-18.** *The findings of his surveys were confusing and irritating.* Solomon continued his discussion of this topic by giving assurance that he had given careful attention to the information he had gathered. He had gathered more information that anyone before him in Jerusalem, and he had given greater study to it than anyone else ever had.

That claim was a strong statement. Only one Israelite king had ruled in Jerusalem before him, and that person was his father David. However, Canaanite kings had ruled in Jerusalem for perhaps a thousand years before David conquered the city and made it his capital. No doubt Solomon meant to include all of those rulers in his claim, but he still said he had seen more of the world and investigated more of its works than anyone before him. Furthermore, after the information had been gathered, he had given it careful scrutiny and had studied it with great care. As he did so, he took note, not only to the information that was positive and helpful, but also to the information that was full of craziness and folly. He did not neglect any source of information that might possibly help him, his nation, and his people (1:16-17a).

However, when all of the study was completed, he reached one unshakable conclusion. All that information was useless to make any changes that would produce meaningful results. Gaining helpful suggestions from the mass of information was as elusive as grabbing at the wind (1:17b).

Solomon gave two reasons for his conclusion: (1) All that mass of information only provided frustration. It was not innovative. It was not consistent. It was not conclusive. No clear patterns developed, and no strong examples stood out to provide sure guidance. It only brought confusion and disappointment (1:18a). (2) The vastness of the information provided no hope or joy. It only produced sadness and sorrow.

Every place he had investigated was full of misery. Every course of action he had surveyed produced more failure than success. Every national, social, or ethnic group he had consulted was infected with abuse, dishonesty, selfishness, and hurt. Every situation he had reviewed was as full of trouble and hopelessness as every other. No one had any usable answers. The more he had learned,

the more he had become discouraged. He was more sorrowful after all the study he had done than before (1:18b).

Solomon's experience with information gathering has great application to today. Each new generation travels, observes, and learns about the world more than every previous generation. Broader acquaintance with other peoples and other cultures has brought new awareness of the great variety of people and life in the world, but it has not made people wiser or happier than those who went before.

In addition, in recent years, the means of communication have grown exponentially in every direction. Ordinary people now have the ability available to them to send messages instantly to every part of the world and to receive answers back in a matter of moments. Leaders make surveys of every kind on every conceivable subject,

commercial, political, and religious. Those surveys are so pervasive that they have become a part of people's daily routine. Companies use information from those surveys to make the most attractive products that have ever existed. Politicians use the information to shape their campaigns and their policies. Religious leaders use the information to help them minister more effectively. And charlatans use the information to attract more followers. However, the surveys and the actions they inspire never seem to solve people's intractable problems or even make people's lives more wholesome or even more contented. People today live in the Information Age, but the misery goes on as it has for thousands of years. Thoughtful people, like Solomon are sad, because it is all to no avail.

More information about the world just arouses more frustration and sorrow. It is massive, but it is "*vanity, grabbing at the wind.*"