

'SMOKE AND MIRRORS' (*Seeing Through the Facades of 'Life under the Sun'*) Studies in Ecclesiastes

'Merry-Go-Round'

Kids can really get hurt trying to get on, or off, a fast moving merry-go-round. It's one of the most dangerous things in the playground – in fact, that's why you don't see them in playgrounds much anymore. If you don't do it just right, it will not be very *merry* when you *go down* not *round* when boarding that spinning wheel of misfortune. It's just science - if a vertical, stationary object (*you*) tries to get on a speeding, rotating steel circle (*it*), risk of potential pain is greatly increased. You might be able to get on it if you can run in a concentric circle, beside it, at the same speed, before trying to leap on. But, since there's no way to govern the speed of the ground, there's no margin of error boarding that risky ride. The illustration helps us see why this fast-revolving *life under the sun* can be frustrating or dangerous for anyone trying to live a *life under heaven* from God which doesn't move at the same mad pace as this world.

This is the conflict under scrutiny by Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived *under the sun* (other than Jesus, of course). The conflict between *life under the sun* (*repetitive life cycles in the natural realm*) with the *life under heaven* (*linear spiritual eternal progression*) is the introductory subject of **Ecclesiastes 1 & 2**. This temporary *life under the sun* is a monotonous merry-go-round existence for the natural man apart from God. The eternal life we acquire at salvation is the purposeful, fulfilling *life under heaven* experience of spiritual people, in whom God's life has become a steady, stabilizing influence within them.

As Christians, we are born on the *merry-go-round*, but are required to get off of it when we are born again and saved by grace. Are we supposed to ever get back on the world's merry-go-round? For believers who try to alternate between a natural life 'under the sun' and a spiritual life 'under heaven', it is a painful enigma how to do that and why. There's a reason some refer to this life as a *merry-go-round existence* - those boring daily routines we're have to endure in our annual trips *under and around the sun* become monotonous and 'vain'. Without some kind of inner spiritual gyroscope for equilibrium, everything feels like pointless, reckless repetition.

If we get out of sync with God's way of *life under heaven*, all of those smoke and mirror religions, secular philosophies, and worldly activities can begin to seem acceptable. This is why some religions embrace weird *life under the sun* theologies (*Hinduism and Buddhism belief in cycles of reincarnation*); or an atheistic view concluding there is no heavenly life to worry about seems logical; or worldly men or women concluding that '*you only go around once in life, so go for all the gusto you can!*' seem worth trying to spice things up in life. All these spiritual smoke and mirror facades often lead to cynicism and depression, psychotic behavior and/or suicide. But the *life under the sun* is much different if *life under heaven* within the soul keeps one in sync with God and stabilized in this world. Life isn't easy *under the sun*, but it is supposed to be far more abundant than just a boring repetitious existence. Wise people see great value of *life under the sun* when it is also lived with the *life under heaven* from God. Then this life has great value with eternal, progressive purpose, not merely monotonous, pointless endless cycles of *vanity*.

The follower of Jesus is learning to live this *life under the sun* outwardly, according to God's *life under heaven* within. He or she knows this *merry-go-round* world will never slow down to God's pace and that if they try to catch up with its reckless pace, frustration, confusion and estrangement from God is certain. Because they are created in the image of God, even unbelievers feel that inner monotony, emptiness, and loneliness they try to fill with all kinds of temporal things to forget their inner soul-sickness (*vanity of vanities*). But nothing material, temporal, or sensual can ever fill the *God-shaped vacuum* only Christ can fulfill. **Ecclesiastes** is King Solomon's expositional letter showing all the false vanities people substitute for God and His ways to ignore their soul-sickness. King Solomon proved that all these possessions, exploits and gratifications are, in the end, '*chasing after the wind*' without God. Everything '*under the sun*' is just '*smoke & mirrors*' facades. But thanks be to God that '*life under heaven*' can be lived out here '*under the sun*' in a way that is fulfilling, blessed and eternal. Getting off the run-away '*merry-go-round*' life of this world, frees you for a safer, better ride '*under heaven*' during your life here '*under the sun*'. **PtL**

The Circle (Cycle) of Life
(Wearisome Ways of the World)
1:1-2:26

“...Vanity of vanities, all is vanity... under the sun...” (1:2-4)

Solomon’s Premise: ‘Life is Vanity’

*the circuit of the sun (1:5),
the currents of the wind (1:6),
the ebb & flow of water (1:7)
all things come and go (1:8)
what’s been, will be again (1:9)
only ‘reruns’ under the sun (1:10)
Eternal amnesia of what’s done under the sun (1:11)*

Solomon’s Plan: ‘Understanding Vanity’

*search out everything done ‘under the sun’ (1:12-13)
this task is required by everyone, ‘under the sun’ (1:13-15)
wisdom done, is crucial, but not fun ‘under the sun’ (1:16-18)*

Solomon’s Pain: Causes of ‘Soul-Sickness’

*personal pleasures = fun becomes folly ‘under the sun’ (2:1-11)
personal experiences = the wise and fools end the same ‘under the sun’ (2:12-16)
personal accomplishments = all acquisitions are left for somebody else to waste (2:17-23)*

Solomon’s Proposal: Include God and Life Gets Good!

*‘Nothing is better for a man than... his soul should enjoy good... from the hand of God...’ (2:25)
‘...but to the sinner He (God) gives the work of gathering and collecting... This is vanity...’ (2:26)*

Discussion Group Questions

Ecclesiastes One simply portrays the way the world is made with perpetual cycles of action. There is no mention of God but fallen humans living in a fallen world of routine, therefore they become bored with the monotony of life.

Chapter Two is Solomon’s exploration of things people do to keep them from feeling the boredom and monotony ruts of everyday living. Only in his summation (2:24) does Solomon bring God into it. And then, in verse 2:25-26 he reminds people of the futility of life without including God in your ‘life under the sun.’

- Talk about what people without the Lord you know do to fill up that God-shaped void they feel. How can you see that eventually the things they do to avoid boredom and monotony, don’t last and end up being insufficient, *vain* and like *grasping after the wind*?
- Can boredom and monotony happen to a Christian? Why and how?
- What can you do rather than go after more temporal distractions, if life begins to feel boring and monotonous?