

From Dust to Dust to Eternal Life Ecclesiastes 3:16-21

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Our church's teaching series has been working through a lesser known book of the Bible called Ecclesiastes. While you may have trouble finding it in your Bible, the message of Ecclesiastes is easy to discover. It describes the life in this world we are all living.

- It feels empty, like I'm just chasing the wind. Sound familiar?
- It feels like I never have enough. I always want more. Can you relate?
- It feels like I'm working myself to death, but for what?

The author is the famous king of Israel named Solomon. Solomon was extraordinarily insightful about life. There is a collection of wisdom sayings by him in the Bible called Proverbs to prove it. His favorite word in Ecclesiastes to describe man's search for meaning is *vanity*. The word means *vapor*. A vapor looks like it's actually something but if you try to catch it, it's really nothing. He says that's what life and life's pursuits are like—vapor; meaningless.

Solomon was also incredibly rich. Legendarily rich. Solomon was so rich that he basically says in chapter 2 that he could buy or do whatever his heart wanted to buy or do.

In his quest for something meaningful in life, he decided he would try an experiment. He decided to test his heart with any and every pleasure his heart desired.

- He tried parties, alcohol, laughing, and carrying on. Conclusion? It's vanity.
- He tried great accomplishments and building projects. Conclusion? Vanity.
- He accumulated great wealth and possessions. Conclusion? It didn't make him happy.
- He tried sexual pleasure and amassed a harem that included 700 wives and 300 concubines. Even this he said was vanity.

With every one of these experiences, he asked his heart, *are you happy now?* Every time, the answer was *no*. He exhausted the pleasures and indulgence available and concluded that all these human pursuits were all vanity. Nothingness.

This is the same depression famous powerful and rich people have when they get to the top of the ladder and realize there's nothing there. There are legions of examples, but I'll share this one. After his third NFL championship, Tom Brady was interviewed on *60 Minutes* and described the feeling of winning three championships, "*God, it's gotta be more than this.*" The journalist asked him, "*What's the answer?*" Brady said, "*I wish I knew. I wish I knew.*" ("Tom Brady Talks to Steve Kroft." *60 Minutes*. CBS News, Nov. 4, 2005.)

Solomon, and Tom Brady are telling the same story. The human condition is a constant frenzy seeking more money, accomplishment, fame, whatever, only to be massively disappointed when you achieve it.

Solomon moves from depression in pleasure to depression in death.

¹⁶ "Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work." (Ecclesiastes 3:16-17)

Solomon notes three things that are inescapable in this world: Injustice, inevitable death, and insignificance.

Injustice (Verse 16)

He looks around and everywhere he sees injustice. Where there should be justice, there is injustice. Where things should be righteous and safe, there is wickedness. Apparently in Solomon's day, people in power took advantage of the weak. People in the courts of "justice" took bribes. The places in society charged with protecting the social good were found to be themselves corrupt. Wrongs were done against people who were helpless to do anything about it.

It is not so different today. Politicians elected to serve the people serve themselves. People responsible for children and their welfare are regularly found to be exploiting them. Legal technicalities let the guilty go free. Terrorists blow up bombs in airport terminals indiscriminately killing men, women, and children. Where's the justice? Our papers tell these stories every day. Where there should be justice, there is injustice. Where there should be righteousness, there is wickedness. The world is a mess. What's the point?

Inevitable death (Verses 19-20)

19 "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return." (Verses 19-20)

That's a basic statement and easily proved. Everybody lives, everybody dies. Eventually and inevitably, we all end up in the same place. We do so at an alarming rate. Statistically, two people die every second. Each of these people lived a life. They had family that loved them. They went to school. Watched sunsets. Dreamed about what their life would be. But now they are dead. Thirty more people have died while you read this paragraph.

Of all the things that crush us, the worst is the inevitability of what awaits us. Solomon says that in this way we are no different than the animals. They live, and then they return to dust. We live and return to dust. Dust to dust.

I just read this morning about a facility in Detroit called the Cryogenics Institute. They cryogenically freeze people before they die. The hope is that science will come up with a way in the future to bring them back. 100 people are currently frozen there hoping to preserve their lives. That's not so different from the Pharaohs and their embalming and pyramids. Even a gravestone in a cemetery is an attempt to allow a person's existence to continue to matter somehow. There is a reason we engrave the names in granite.

Why do we die? When somebody dies, we ask, what was the cause? We point to cancer or car accidents or heart attacks, the Bible says there is a much deeper reason for every death. We die because we are sinners. Sin is a church-word so let me define it for you. *Sin is rebellion against God.* Sin is a person wanting to do his own thing the way he or she wants. No God. No accountability. It's not dependence but independence from our Creator.

God's judgment is found in Genesis 3:19, *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

To dust we return, two every second. 120 every minute. 172,800 people every day. Solomon looks at people dying and looks at animals and birds and everything else dying, and he concludes that we are all the same because we all end up the same—dust.

His third conclusion is a simple but painful one. If we inevitably and unavoidably end up dust, what can be said about even the lives we live?

Insignificance

How many of you remember the band Kansas? Perhaps their most popular song was a song called "Dust in the Wind."

"I close my eyes,
Only for a moment, then the moment's gone
All my dreams
Pass before my eyes, a curiosity
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind

It's the same old song,
We're just a drop of water, in an endless sea
All we do
Just crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind...

Don't hang on
Nothing lasts forever, but the earth and sky
It's there always
And all your money won't another minute buy
Dust, all we are is dust in the wind."

(Kerry Livgren, Kerry A. Livgren "Dust in the Wind," © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC)

That's encouraging, isn't it? Why would a metaphysical song like this be popular? Your life has no meaning! You're just a speck of dust in the universe. This was the '70s so apparently it worked well while smoking something.

Solomon wasn't smoking anything. He was just being intellectually honest. We all die. Since that is inevitable, we are merely pretending that what we do or who we are is significant. My relationships. My job. My possessions. My anything. What is he saying really? *Nothing matters*. We build our houses in the sand. Atheist Bertrand Russell has said that at best we live "on the firm foundation of unyielding despair." (Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic: And Other Essays*, p. 48)

You might be thinking, *this sure doesn't sound like an Easter message to me*. Easter doesn't begin with the resurrection. Easter begins with the despair and helplessness of the human situation. Our clock is ticking. Tick. Tick. Tick. Six people died while you read that. 1.2 million people die every week. We live. We die. Dust to dust. Then what's the point?

This leads us to one weekend in the Middle East 2,000 years ago. It has everything to do with a man whose birth was announced by angels. They told Mary and Joseph to name him Jesus, which means *Savior*. The angel said this child would someday save his people from their sins. As an adult, Jesus said he was the Son of God. He said many other things about

God, sin, judgment, and love. Thousands flocked to hear him. He did miracles that were so obviously supernatural that a religious leader named Nicodemus came to him in the night and said, "No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." (John 3:2) The miracles established his claim to be divine. He was Immanuel. God with us. God became dust to save dust. How?

The Cross: An Injustice That Saves Us

Remember, Solomon lamented injustice. Where righteousness should be, instead there was wickedness. Solomon didn't realize that God would use injustice to bring justice.

- *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*
- *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, (1 Peter 3:18)*

Jesus was the holy Son of God. Yet, he died on the cross in our place. Does that seem fair? God made him vicariously responsible for our sins. You want to talk about injustice! We see it when innocents are wrongly sentenced to serve time. Then later DNA shows that someone else did the crime. We see that as injustice and it is.

But what if someone willingly took the prison time for a crime they didn't do? Or what if someone willingly went to the electric chair for a crime that they didn't commit? What if they died in the criminal's place? That is what the cross was. Jesus willingly died for our sins and guilt. He loves us. He loves you. He paid the penalty of our sins so that we can go free from the eternal punishment of our sins. But what about death? Scripture calls it our last enemy. (1 Corinthians 15:26) It's great to be forgiven, but dust still awaits.

The Resurrection: From Dust to Eternal Life

The four gospels give us the eyewitness accounts of Jesus dying on the cross, being buried in a tomb and three days later rising from the dead. He appeared in the upper room with them. His resurrection was physical. He ate. He had scars from his crucifixion. He appeared many times to many people, even 500 at one time. Many of them died martyrs testifying that Jesus was resurrected. As Pascal said, "I [*believe*] those witnesses that get their throats cut." (Blaise Pascal as quoted by Timothy Keller, *Reason for God*, p. 218) Many did.

But what does this mean? How does his resurrection help dust-to-dust people like us? The Apostle Paul gives us the meaning.

⁵¹ "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' ⁵⁵ 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'" (1 Cor. 15:51-55)

This may sound confusing. We celebrate Jesus' resurrection as conquering death for us. Yet everybody still dies. How is this helpful?

Dust to dust is what happens to all of us. But the resurrection means God's not done with our dust. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he forever conquered death's final power over us. Death and dust isn't the final word.

The resurrection of Jesus has a promise attached. God will raise from the dead everyone who believes in Jesus as their Savior. His resurrection is a preview of what is to come for all who put their faith and trust in him. For those who believe, we are not dust in the wind, we are dust awaiting the fullness of resurrection. We are dust that will consciously and bodily live forever with God.

Dust Matters

Solomon laments that since we are all dead in the end, even what we do now doesn't really matter. But absent from Ecclesiastes is resurrection. Dust in the wind doesn't matter. Dust in the love of God and his grace matters. Dust living in the confident expectation of eternal life matters. The resurrection of Jesus infuses everything in this life with hope and meaning again.

"The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won... If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense – [then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world – news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things – and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all." (N.T. Wright as quoted by Timothy Keller, *Reason for God*, p. 221)

This is God's final answer to all his critics that he doesn't care or allows evil or he isn't fair. He sent his Son into the world to die for injustice, hate, murder, bitterness, and all the other sins we see all around us and in our own hearts. He raised Jesus from the dead to conquer death's final claim upon us.

Jesus was standing at the grave of his friend Lazarus. Lazarus was dead. His sisters Mary and Martha were grieving. "*Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.'*" (John 11:25) Though he be dust, yet shall he live. Jesus makes the extraordinary claim to be himself, the resurrection and the life. Belief in him destroys death. If Solomon would have heard this one verse, Ecclesiastes would sound much different. Dust to dust, but wait, there's hope here.

Notice the condition. Whoever believes in **me**. Eternal life is made available, but to receive it, we must believe in Jesus as our personal Savior and Lord. That's a personal question for you to carefully consider. You are going to die. Dust is your destiny, but is it your final one? Let this Easter be for you, the time in your life when you spiritually realize what you must sense about life without God—it's hollow. There's always something missing. That something is someone. His name is Jesus.

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