

Ecclesiastes: The Futility of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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We are beginning a new teaching series this weekend on the most intriguing book of the Bible. It's not often preached through and I'll bet few here have gone through a teaching series in it. So this will likely be brand new for most of us. That adds some excitement, doesn't it?

Today we begin Ecclesiastes. It's found in the Old Testament, right after Proverbs and right before Song of Solomon. Right between wisdom and love. That's appropriate given the questions Ecclesiastes raises about the meaning of life.

If we were to take a tour of the Bible, when we arrived at Job our tour guide would say, "*And now we're entering the Wisdom literature.*" This literary designation includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These books are some of the most beautifully written in all of Scripture. They deal with life as it actually is. Job loses everything except his faith. Psalms sings through life's ups and downs. Proverbs urges us away from folly and toward a practical life of wisdom.

Then we get to Ecclesiastes. This book is enigmatic. It is embraced by philosophers and artists because of its gritty approach to the brevity of life. To give you an idea, here is a compiled list of the most used words in the book (Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary*, p. 10):

- Vanity (38)
- Wisdom (53)
- God (40)
- Toil (33)
- Death (21)
- Under the Sun (33)
- Joy (17)

On the surface, its tone and questions seem rather gloomy. One commentator says, "*Think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible written on Monday morning.*" (Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, p. 14.)

But isn't that when we need realistic faith the most? Monday mornings? Sunday faith is great. Monday faith is the real test. The day when life feels like pure drudgery. When the grind of work, home, sleep; work, home, sleep; work, home, sleep numbs us from the big question, what is the point of all this?

Here's the thing about Ecclesiastes, it addresses this in the most indirect and satirical way. It isn't until the end in chapter 12 that the author unveils fully the answers to life's questions. For 11 chapters he teases us by pointing out life's absurdities only hinting that there might be a solution at all.

Before you think, a series about the absurdity of life? How can this be helpful to me? Besides it being Scripture (and all revelation is helpful), Ecclesiastes is actually a guide to joy and true enjoyment of life.

Well known and beloved theologian J.I. Packer has said that Ecclesiastes is his favorite book of the Bible. Not Romans. Not John. Ecclesiastes. He says the reason is that he is by nature introverted and prone to a cynical spirit. God used Ecclesiastes powerfully in his life to help him realize that God desires us to live our absurd lives with gladness. I don't know that this series will make Ecclesiastes your favorite book of the Bible but this may be your favorite series.

Of course as we go we will keep one eye looking out for Jesus. The Old Testament Scriptures are all about Him even though he is more background than foreground.

Let's Meet the Author

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

This would seem quite straightforward, especially when later in the book the author says he advanced in society, education, and wealth beyond any who had ever lived in Jerusalem. Who could this be but Solomon? Particularly because Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived and this letter is written from the perspective of wisdom.

Yet, we actually don't know who wrote Ecclesiastes. Most modern scholars don't think it was Solomon. How? There was an ancient practice known as fictional biography. Someone could legitimately assume the identity of a historical person and write something as if the historical person was writing it. Maybe like me writing an autobiography as if I was Winston Churchill.

Since this was often practiced and some of the language here dates to a later period than Solomon, best to say we don't know for sure. Could be Solomon. Could be a pseudo-Solomon. It doesn't matter because this is in the canon of Scripture and is therefore inspired and reliable.

He calls himself "the Preacher." Other translations go with Teacher. The word means the gatherer or the assembler. He is not a philosopher in the ivory tower. He is a preacher of truth for the masses. As we go through this you will see that the author is a bit of a Yoda-like figure. He often answers questions by asking them. His goal is to draw us deeper into the enigmas of life.

It has 12 chapters. We will take on the book with a sectional exposition. Sometimes long sections, sometimes short. Today we're going through verses 1-11.

Man's Dilemma – His Whole Life is Vanity

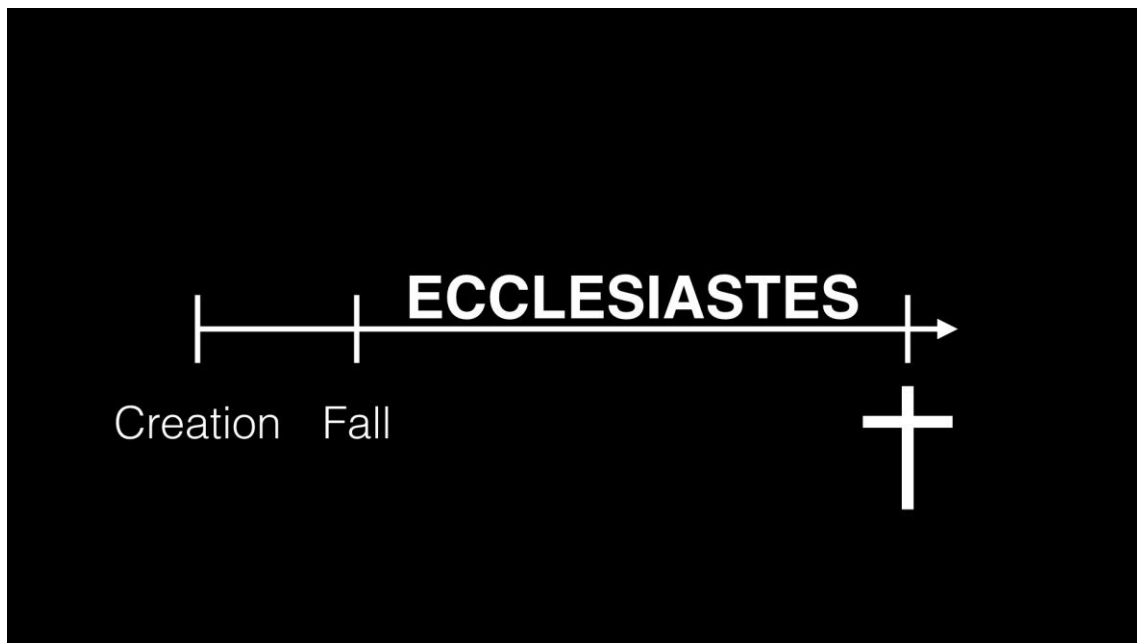
*"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity."* (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

The Preacher begins by deconstructing the secular man's search for meaning apart from God. This is a most vulnerable place because we all want to think our life matters somehow. The secular man constructs structures and forms that give the appearance of importance and purpose. Generally, this involves the business and busyness of life. Ask the average guy on the street, "How's life?" And he will answer "I'm so busy." People quickly roll out, "We're so busy." Busyness gives a sense of importance to our lives. Our activities and endeavors cloak the deeper questions from our view. *I must be important; look at how busy I am.* But

the Preacher begins by dragging from the depths of our hearts the troubling, deeper question, what is the point of all this?

His summary? *"All is vanity."* By vanity he is not referring to pride specifically. The Hebrew word is a difficult one to translate. It means "vapor." *Vapor of vapors, all is vapor.* The NIV translates it as "meaningless." Eugene Peterson's *The Message* says, *"Smoke. Nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything."*

It is a good word picture. On a cold day when you go outside, you can see your breath. Vapor. There are two things to observe about vapor. It doesn't last long. It's there and gone. It also has no substance even when it is there. Try catching your breath vapors. It gives an appearance of being something but there's nothing really to it. Perhaps a good translation of meaning would be, *futility of futilities. All is futility.*



You have to read Ecclesiastes with one eye on Genesis 3 and one on the cross. Genesis 3 describes the sin of Adam and Eve. It is known as The Fall of Man from his moral perfection. His Fall from shalom with his Creator. When did everything turn to futility? When God was no longer on the throne of Adam's heart. So one eye on The Fall and the other eye on the cross where Jesus' death reverses the Fall and by faith in him, everything matters again.

Ecclesiastes describes man's tortured existence between the Fall and the Incarnation. Between Adam and Jesus. Between the loss of life and the gift of life. What's it like to be made for God and not have God? How do you scratch out a life of purpose when you are spiritually dead?

It feels like futility. It feels like vanity. It feels like one day you're here and suddenly you're old. You're here, you're gone. Who gives a rip?

His first proof for this is the family tree and the family crypt. *"A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever."* (Verse 4) He says that backwards. We normally say, *"A generation comes, a generation goes."* He starts with the departing generation and then the one replacing it. The unending, unstoppable passing of time as

seen in the constant going of the older generation and the constant coming of a new generation. The new generation thinks they will always be young, cool, and hip. But quicker than you can blink they become the departing generation. There is always a new one displacing the old one.

Young people today have no idea yet how true this is. But if you've been around the block a few times, you know the feeling. It's the creeping sense that your role and importance, your health and vitality, is slipping. Almost imperceptibly declining. And with it, our sense of importance and place in our world.

Two weeks ago I made a very quick trip to Iowa. My high school invited back the varsity basketball team from the 1985-1986 season to honor the 30th anniversary of the year we went 26-1, the best record by far in school history. We were arguably the best team in school history. It was my senior year. They honored us at halftime (see picture below). It was great to see my old teammates. Great group of guys. It was a privilege to play with them.



A few things stood out to me. One was how old my teammates looked. What happened? Second was the general lack of interest by the current student body. As they introduced us, they gave our stats, and we had polite applause. But we were just old guys from a bygone era. Third was when I asked the current coach, "Why isn't there a banner for our team in the rafters? They had other years featured, but not the best team in school history?" He said, "Well, there used to be but a former coach took it down and I found it crumpled in the back of a closet." "What? Don't they realize how amazing we were? How important we were?" But that is the way things go. "A generation goes, a generation comes." What is cool, hip, and really important today, is passé, irrelevant, boring, and forgotten tomorrow. The only thing in our existence that seems to remain is the earth itself. But even earth speaks of the futility of life and life's ambitions.

As illustrated in creation

*"The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again."* (Ecclesiastes 1:5-7)

The *sun* goes up; the sun goes down. Whether you or I are here or not, the sun keeps doing its up and down thing. The world keeps spinning.

The *wind* blows and blows only to blow some more. It blows and blows only to blow some more. Dullness. Monotony. Unendingness.

All the *streams* flow into the sea but the sea is not full. For all the apparent importance of river water and flow and waterfalls, the sea is never full. All of the churning and flowing never satisfies to fullness the oceans into which they flow.

Life for humans is like the monotony of the sun, wind, and river. Lots of activity but in the end it's back where it started.

This is theology for a Monday. Back to school. Back to work. Back to homemaking. Back to the same old thing. One more day of slippage toward irrelevance. Isn't this encouraging? It gets better.

As experienced in the weariness of life

*"All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
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.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has been already
in the ages before us."* (Ecclesiastes 1:8-10)

The Preacher moves from the futility of man's endeavors to their utter weariness. The eye is always seeing but never satisfied. The ear is always listening yet always needing to hear something new. Something different. Something more. Never satisfied.

This picture by Steve Cotts (see top of next page) illustrates this in our modern culture. The average person today checks their phone 85 times a day. That's five times per waking hour. Every 12 minutes. Anything new here? Any word from somebody? Any good news? Anybody text me? What lies behind the constant checking, looking, and hoping?



The eye is always seeing but never satisfied. This obsessive discontent drives us further on, work harder, work longer. More, more, more. Ecclesiastes says, for what?

*"There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after. (Ecclesiastes 1:11)*

It's been said that cemeteries are filled with irreplaceable people. Yet life goes on. Each week people of prominence like Supreme Court justice Antony Scalia die. Famous and once beautiful people die. We see the post about their death. We think, *Oh, that's too bad*. Life goes on. The world keeps spinning. People come, people go. My day of going is coming.

The Preacher shouts to a world without God searching for meaning, busy with artificial self-importance, what are you doing? Why are you doing it? Look at the sun. The wind. The ocean. Look at the cemetery. Look at your insatiable cravings. Look at your family tree. What are all these things saying about the mirage that is your life? *"What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."* (James 4:14) All the banners to our own greatness end up in the garbage. So what is it all really? Vanity. Futility. Absurdity.

That's not encouraging at all! Why write this? Preach this? Or, if all is meaningless why write 11 more chapters?

Ecclesiastes describes man after the Fall and before the cross. I wonder if chapter 1 feels like your life? Is that the state of your soul as you sit here today? It certainly describes the world with incredible accuracy. We see the decay and anguish all around us. Is there hope?

Chapter 1 is like going to the doctor and hearing that you have a rare form of cancer. The doctor slowly describes the cause, the conditions, and the effects. You listen with shock because the symptoms he describes are what you have been feeling for weeks. Every detail is spot on with your life. His diagnosis perfectly describes your experience.

How do you leave the appointment? Impressed. This guy knows his stuff. I want to hear more, perhaps about a cure? Ecclesiastes is spot on to the world we live in and the world of our own lives and hearts. This guy knows his stuff. Is there a cure?

Here is where one eye looks ahead to the cross of Jesus. Why did Jesus come?

- *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."* (1 John 3:8)
- *"...that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."* (Hebrews 2:14-15)
- *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23)

Jesus Christ came into the world and died on that cross to save hungry people. Futile-living people. Vapor-like people. And on the other side of the cross, everything matters. And it can matter for you too if you put your hope in the faith of the Son of God, repent of your sins, see Jesus as dying for them, and be granted the gift of eternal life. John 3:16 says, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* My desire is to see God draw the futile-living man or woman to be a faith-living man or woman so that you can experience all of the joy that comes from it.

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