

“Everything is Meaningless”
Ecclesiastes: The Good Life
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
04/16/23

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Eccl 1:2 – “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (NIV)

Welcome to what church will be like over the next 8 weeks. We are beginning today a new series through the book of Ecclesiastes (go ahead and turn there in your Bibles if you will) and in case you can't tell from verse 2 this is not exactly the most happy and bright 12 chapters of the Scriptures.

Ecclesiastes, just to warn you if you're not familiar, on the surface is a glass half-empty sort of work.

Zack Eswine, in his fantastic book *Recovering Eden*, says this – **“Ecclesiastes sounds like a crazed man downtown. He smells like he hasn't bathed – looks like it too – and as we pass by he won't stop glaring at us and beckoning to us that our lives are built on illusions, and that we are all going to die.”**

Let me try to explain. You see, Ecclesiastes is a part of the **wisdom genre** in the Scriptures. So the Bible is not one book, it's 66 books that tell one giant story about God. And in those 66 books there's different genres – narrative, history, letters, poetry, and the genre of wisdom.

Now, the wisdom genre is given to us as a part of the Bible to help us know how God has designed life to work, how we are supposed to live into that design, and then generally speaking how it will go if we do. The most famous wisdom book is the book of Proverbs.

It sounds something like this...

- **Prov 22:6 – Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.**
- **Prov 16:3 – Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.**

This is what wisdom literature often sounds like – If you work hard and work for the Lord, that's good and a part of God's design, and generally speaking what you set out to do will be accomplished. That is good and true, and it guides us into the best way to live.

Ecclesiastes is also wisdom literature, but it sounds like a whole other world. So Proverbs says – commit your work to the Lord and your plans will be established. Ecclesiastes says...

- **Eccl 2:17 – So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.**

If Proverbs is the wisdom book of rules, Ecclesiastes is the wisdom book of exceptions.

Proverbs is the book that tells us “i before e except after c” and just when we think we’ve got a grip on it, Ecclesiastes chimes in “or when sounded like “eh” as in “neighbor and weigh”.

In the book of Proverbs – A Good Man + God’s Love + Wisdom = A Good Life.

In Ecclesiastes – A Good Man + God’s Love + Wisdom = Still dies like a Fool.

And for that very reason...this book of Ecclesiastes is a gift to us. Here’s what I mean...

Ecclesiastes makes us do something we spend our entire lives trying to avoid as modern Americans – stare honestly and unapologetically at the harsh realities of life. That it’s boring, monotonous, tedious, and painful. Ecclesiastes makes us finally admit to ourselves and to the Lord we’re all running on a treadmill and going nowhere.

And if that’s not enough, after making us face the pain and boredom and monotony of life, it does not offer us any simple, trite or pithy principles. This book gives no “4 steps to joy” or “5 principles for a happy life” or whatever else we might want offered to us when life feels burdensome and uncontrollable.

Ecclesiastes is a gift of a book because it does not come alongside of us, put its arm around our shoulder and say – “Cheer up, life is good.”

It says – “I’m sorry friend, life is just as hard as you think it is, and guess what, you’re going to die.”

Philip Ryken – **“More than anything else in the Bible, [Ecclesiastes] captures the futility and frustration of a fallen world: the drudgery of work, the emptiness of foolish pleasure and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life. Think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible we know was written on a Monday morning, probably by a philosophy major.”**

It makes us face the brutality of life, and then it just pushes us in even further. It starts by facing the meaningless, it continues in the meaningless, it repeats the meaningless...and then, at the very last second it swoops in to show us how to make it through the meaningless *with God*.

So this, friends, is a book for us...

- It’s a book for those of us who feel like – I did a bunch of the right things I was supposed to do, and it all still sort of went to crap.

- It's a book for those of us who feel like – no matter how hard I try, life feels like running through the woods constantly tripping on roots I can't see.
- It's also a book for those of us who would lie to ourselves and pretend as if the melancholy pain of life is avoidable if we just move somewhere new, get something new, or be someone new.
- But it's also a book for those of us who long for joy. Who need to be disciplined into feasting and laughing with God.

Ecclesiastes moves into the mess of life with us seeking to discover – where is God and how do we live a good life with Him? And so I'm excited for the next 8 weeks to get to glean from what the riches of this book have to offer us.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 - Walkthrough

So let's begin together shall we? Today we will tackle chapter 1, and it's a great way to start our journey into the book because in chapter 1 we get a summation via a poem of the rest of the book.

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

The title of this book in English, "Ecclesiastes", is a translation of a Greek word which means "Preacher". And it's called that because in the book the main character, who we're introduced to right here in 1:1 is called *The Preacher*.

Now though it's not 100% confirmed, it's most likely this is talking about Solomon, who was the Son of David, king in Jerusalem. An extremely wealthy and powerful man, the man who built the first Jewish temple, who the Bible calls the wisest man to ever live.

But here's what's interesting – although the Preacher is the main character and even the main voice, he's not the author. The author of Ecclesiastes is a 3rd party reflecting on the words of the preacher and using them as an instructing tool for his son.

Look near the end of the book, **Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 – 9 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. 10 The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.**

So the book starts in the 3rd-person and ends in the 3rd-person, and then all throughout is first person – the words and teachings of the preacher.

And that matters because the words of the preacher alone can appear quite cynical and jaded. The basic theology of the preacher as we're about to see is "life is hard, and then you die." And the author is trying to use these words to show us – "He's right! But only partially right. There's more to the story."

But before we can get to that "more to the story", let's first look at the opening words of the preacher.

Ecc 1:2-3 – 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

Now, there are two really central themes you have to understand from these 2 verses to make sense of the book.

VANITY:

The first is this idea of **vanity**. It's going to come up 38 times in the next 12 chapters. It's the Hebrew word **Hebel**. We started this morning by reading the NIV translation of "Meaningless". And that's good, but this word Hebel actually goes a bit stronger than that.

It literally translates as "vapor, mist". It's gone just as quickly as it appears. It's fleeting, it's ungrabbable, it vanishes almost in an instant.

Specifically – everything is vanity...**under the sun**.

UNDER THE SUN:

That's the 2nd big theme of the book. It shows up 30 times in the book.

And it's the Preacher's way of describing life here in the world. To view life "under the sun" is to take an earthly point of view and leave God out of the picture. It's meant more as a statement of time, not so much place. He doesn't mean literally under the sun, as much as he means on this side of eternity. Life here and now, on the earth.

So here in the opening few verses we get the preacher's thesis – **Life under the sun** (life here and now, without God) **is all vanity**. (fleeting, vapor, meaningless)

The preacher starts his sermon this way, and he ends his sermon this way. In Ecc 12:28 in his final words he'll repeat this – **Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.**

At this point the preacher has come out swinging...

He opened his sermon without a cool illustration or joke or witty analogy to get our attention – he goes right in – All is vanity.

But now he's going to spend some time backing up that point. In other words, in case we're not yet convinced, he's going to show us just how vain life truly is.

So let's keep reading his poem together and see why he argues life is vanity. He's going to give us three main reasons that all is vanity.

We'll come back to v4, let's start in v5...

Eccl 1:5-7 – 5 The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 6 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. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.

→ All is vanity because life is a mundane cycle.

The sun rose this morning at 6:50 am. And tonight it's predicted to set at 7:56pm. And tomorrow morning guess what will happen again? The sun will rise. And then guess what, it'll set again. And right now we're in the season of Spring, guess what's coming soon? Summer. And then after summer comes fall, and then winter and then we're back to, you guessed it – spring.

The preacher is pointing to nature going – do you see how much of a loop this whole thing is on? Do you see the vanity? Do you feel how it's the same old thing after the same old thing after the same old thing? Do you feel that? [Like Jackson in the video]

Tomorrow you're going to wake up, get your coffee drink of choice, drive or log into work, go to the meeting, have the same small talk with your coworkers, eat lunch at one of the same 5 places, go to the same gym for the same workout, have dinner with the same family or roommates, head to the same community group with the same people and talk about the same sin and struggle, go home and watch the same rerun, spend time scrolling the same instagram feed, and then go to bed just to wake up, rinse, and repeat.

For 20 or 30 or 40 more years until maybe you can retire. Then you'll be free! Right? Wrong.

Because what are you going to do then? Wake up. Get your coffee drink of choice. Go play the same golf course and shoot the same score. Go to the same lunch place. And so on and so forth. And then you die.

Do you see the preacher's point? It just goes round and round and round. Filled with the agonizing mundane of the same old same old. All is hebel. Like a breath. It's vanity.

He continues...

Eccl 1:8-10 – 8 All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 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. 10 Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.

→ All is vanity because life is elusive.

Hebel. A vapor or a mist. Have you ever tried to grab smoke? Have you ever tried to bottle up wind? It's a real physical thing and yet the moment you try to get near it, it runs away.

That's what the preacher says life is like – it's elusive. It's always just out of reach. The eye never gets satisfied, the ear is never filled.

Have you ever had that moment where it feels like perfection? 70 degrees. Saturday afternoon. No cares, no concerns. Good friends, good food, good drink – and you just feel like - "Ah, I want to bottle this up. This moment, this feeling. This is magic."

And then in an instant that work stress pops in your brain. That awful memory comes back to your mind. That person makes that joke they shouldn't make. You get that text message of your friend who's in a crisis. And it's like *snap*...moment over. ***That's the elusive nature of life. Smoke. The more you try to grab it, the faster it goes away.***

Or do you ever sense that "**getting a handle on life**" always feels right around the corner? That the control we long for is always just out of reach? It always seems to elude us.

- "I just need to get a hold of my schedule." And yet the demands keep piling up.
- "I just need to get on top of my laundry." And yet there's always more dirty socks.
- "I just need to get a budget to stay in control of my finances." And yet there's always that unforeseen emergency.

Just think about how uncontrollable and ungrabbable life truly is.

- We can pour our whole lives into something, and it might succeed, or it might fail.
- You could land the perfect job at one of the big banks in town, and the market could go belly up next week.
- You could do everything right as a parent, and they might still rebel and run away from Jesus.

Has the last few years not taught us this lesson? How little control we have over the security of our jobs, our health or the health of those we love, our financial status, etc. etc. – and what’s crazy is that we thought that was unique. It wasn’t. We’d just forgotten. It just put what was true – our inability to control anything in life, into the forefront of our vision.

Look back at v4 and then v11...

Eccl 1:4 – A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

Eccl 1:11 – 11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

→ All is vanity because everyone dies and is forgotten.

A generation goes, a new generation is born, and the earth just keeps on spinning.

Life is mundane and cyclical, it’s elusive (you can never fully get your hands around it)...and then in a cruel and sick joke – in case you feel like maybe eventually you’ll get it mastered and under control and build a life just how you want – like a high tide to a well built sand castle the waters of death will come crashing in and eventually you will die and be forgotten.

Grandparents. I feel this one deeply in my bones right now. Over the past 9 months I’ve lost 2 grandparents. And I went last fall up to Minnesota for my grandmother’s funeral. And it was the first time I was meeting some of my cousins’ kids and there’s all these little ones running around. And I remember leaving the little family get together at my uncle’s house driving down main street in this little town, past the grocery store and the little cafe and my grandparent’s old house and all of these memories just flooded back to me from when I was a kid and we would come visit.

And it just hit me like a ton of bricks – I might never be back here. A generation is turning over and that generation is going and a new generation is coming. And now my parents are the grandparents and it’s a whole new rotation of life under the sun.

And listen, I love my grandma. We had great memories together. I remember one visit in college in particular, I was in MN for work and so I went to see her. And we got to spend the whole morning just me and her, and we went to that little cafe and had coffee and I met all of her old lady friends and then we sat in her living room and watched soap operas until she fell asleep. It was beautiful.

And yet here’s the sobering reality the preacher is keenly aware of – I have memories. My kids will have some stories. My grandkids may know her name. My great grandkids will probably have no idea who she was. And she will, like all of us, become a name among thousands on an ancestry.com report.

Because a generation comes and a generation goes but the earth just keeps on spinning.

All is hebel. Like a breath. It repeats round and round, you can't control it, you can't get your hands around it, and it's going to end. It's vanity.

That is the preacher's whole point.

What does man gain by his toil? *NOTHING. Nothing at all. A man gains nothing. All is vanity.*

Gospel Turn

Welcome to Ecclesiastes. How do we make sense of this? Where do we go from here? Because this is the Word of God. It's the inerrant, authoritative, revelation of God to His people. This is the Bible, so what do we do with it?

Right? Like how do we get from "Everything is meaningless and a striving after the wind" to "Can I walk out of here with some joy and a reason to live?" How do we get to the good news from the bad news?

Well first it's helpful to acknowledge what a shallow and superficial version of Christianity does. A shallow and superficial Christianity would take all of this and just slap a "but Jesus" onto the end of verse 14. So that it sounds like this – **14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.**

...but JESUS?

As though knowing Jesus, trusting in Jesus, makes this all go away, erases this book from the Bible and makes it unimportant for us to think about, but friends listen that's not how we get to the gospel from this text.

Because remember – this text is telling us what is true about life under the sun. And even when you trust in Jesus, hear me on this – you still live under the sun.

David Gibson – **"Surely the Christian way of looking at life is different? If I'm a follower of the Lord Jesus, doesn't that change everything? It is true that knowing Christ does provide a whole new angle - the true angle - on what it means to be alive. But the Preacher is not commenting on what life is like without Christ...[He's saying this is] just what the world is like. It's reality. It's the same for everyone, Christian or non-Christian...this is how things are. Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true."**

Even for the person who trusts in Jesus, follows Jesus, hopes in Jesus – life under the sun is still fleeting, elusive, mundane and futile.

I don't think I need to tell you that - Even Christian businesses falter. Even Christian marriages fail. Even Christian friendships fracture. Even Christian lives are marked by cyclical mundanity and elusive futility.

The beauty of the gospel is not that we magically escape the vanity of life under the sun. The beauty of the gospel is that God has entered that vanity with us.

That we're not isolated, alone, left here to figure it out on our own and do the best we can but that God entered it with us.

The eternal God enters into under the sun by taking on flesh. He who was outside the sun, enters into the fragility and mundanity and vanity of life under the sun. That is the good news of Immanuel – God with us.

And then, vanity of vanities – he died on a roman cross. I mean think about it – what is more seemingly vain than the judgment, condemnation and execution of the most beautifully moral person to ever live in human history. I mean you want to talk about absurdity? There is nothing more seemingly absurd and pointless, what else could make life seem like a striving after the wind than a man who gave his life away serving and caring for the poor, the sick, the outcast, and the marginalized being given a criminal's death.

It seems senseless. It seems meaningless. You want to talk about vanity? The Son of God dies.

Unless...God was up to something.

Because as we just celebrated last week – the cross was not the end of the story. 3 days later Jesus, the Son of God, rises again – defeating the futility and vanity of death. Declaring power over it, declaring his rule and reign and shouting across history – **life under the sun may feel like vanity...but there's another life to come after the sun.**

That's the promise of the resurrection. There's life after the 'under the sun'. There's life forever with God.

And so the hope of the resurrection, the promise of the gospel, is not that we will instantly flee out of the vanity of life, but rather that we are given strength to persevere (and maybe even experience

glimpses of joy) in the vanity of life – knowing that God is present with us and that there is life to come after death for all who trust in Jesus.

Just listen to the words of the apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 15**. An entire chapter all about the resurrection. The historical accuracy of the resurrection, the implications of the resurrection, the victory of Christ in the resurrection. But look at how he ends the chapter...

1 Cor 15:58 – Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Under the Sun the preacher wants us to own – our labor is vanity, meaningless, vapor, here today and gone tomorrow. But when there's life after the sun, when there's life with God – our labor is no longer in vain.

That's the resurrection hope underneath the book of Ecclesiastes.

Three Invitations

So in light of that resurrection hope – how then do we live?

This is a series called “The Good Life”. This is wisdom literature. This is the author wanting to use the words of the preacher to lead us into a flourishing life with God. So what does this mean for my Tuesday?

Let me just give us briefly as we close 3 invitations for us this morning, and really as we encounter this whole series of Ecclesiastes.

1. Sacred Honesty

Life under the sun is vanity. It's elusive, it's cyclical, it's mundane, and we will all die. That is true whether you're a Christian or not. But because the resurrection is also true, we must be the first to stop pretending.

As David Gibson wrote – Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't.

Harper + Pretend. Harper loves playing pretend right now. She's got so many pretend friends - there's alligator, and dinosaur, and monster (they all have sharp teeth but they're nice), and her pretend friend Harper (yes it's weird). And her pretend Father (that oddly enough often contradicts her real father). And playing pretend is awesome and cute – when you're 3.

But when you're an adult...it's weird. And yet – modern American life is built on pretending.

Namely pretending that Ecclesiastes 1 is not true. We try to avoid the reality of the meaningless vanity of life by playing one giant game of agreed upon pretend.

- Let's pretend that if we get the promotion, or bring up good children, we'll feel significant and leave a lasting legacy behind us.
- Let's pretend that if we change jobs or get a promotion or work for a cooler company, we won't experience the boredom and monotony of ordinary vocational life.
- Let's pretend that if we move to a new house or a new neighborhood or a new city, we'll be happier and never want to move again.
- Let's pretend that if we end one relationship and start a new one, we'll have romantic bliss forever.
- Let's pretend that if we were married, or weren't married, we would be content.
- Let's pretend that if we had more money we would be satisfied and never stressed ever again.
- Let's pretend that if we get through this week's pile of washing dishes and dirty diapers and shopping lists and busy evenings, next week will be more restful.
- Let's pretend that time is always on our side to do the things we want to do and become the people we want to be.
- Let's pretend we can break the cycle of repetition and finally arrive in a world free from weariness.

And as Christians Ecclesiastes invites us to wake up and stop playing pretend. To just be honest – life under the sun is weary and fleeting.

If you insist on playing pretend, this book will be no help for you. If you insist you can work your way out of the vanity of life with “new, exciting, next, or more” you will completely miss the Good Life offer.

So we must learn to be honest. A sacred honesty with God.

2. Sacred Mundanity

The second invitation of Ecclesiastes is to embrace a sacred mundanity. A sacred monotony. Life under the sun is tedious, often boring, very much mundane, and dry. And everything in us wants to rebel against those things, does it not?

CS Lewis in his work *The Screwtape Letters*, writes of a fictional interaction between two demons, one who is training the other how to tempt and attack humanity. And in the book the older demon says to his protege – **“The Horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart – an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship.”**

Does our culture, do our own hearts, not hate the horror of the same old thing? I need excitement. I need change. I need something new. I need something that’s going to make me happy. I’m just...bored and tired.

One of the constant refrains we’ll see in this book is an invitation to give up the grasping. To stop trying to get out of life what you were never meant to get out of it. To stop thinking that the end of our vanity, a completely happy, free, content life is just right around the corner if we changed something, worked a little harder, lived somewhere better, etc. etc.

And to instead embrace what God’s invitation to his creation has always been. Even back in the garden of Eden. God created Adam and Eve, gave them each other, a place to live, work to do, and His presence. That’s the good life. That’s what we were designed for.

If we’re willing to be good students, the Preacher will show us time and time again that ‘there is nothing better’ than to have a place to inhabit, a thing to do in that place, and some people in that place to share it with – all with and in the presence of God.

We rebel against the mundane of the same people, the same job, the same town. And yet the preacher says there’s nothing better than that! That’s where the good life is found – a place to inhabit, a thing to do in that place, some people to share that place with – all with and in the presence of God.

That’s the Bible’s picture of the good life! **1 Thess 4** - make it your goal to live a quiet life and work with your hands so you’ll gain the respect of those who don’t know Jesus. That’s it. That’s the good life.

3. Sacred Joy

As we learn to be honest about the world and the vanity of life under the sun, and we learn that with resurrection hope our labor is not in vain, but we give ourselves to the sacred mundane of a people, in a place, good work and the presence of God – that is where we find sacred joy.

Because God is in the monotony. God is in the mundane. Notice this contrast...

- The Preacher says – the sun rising and setting over and over again is vanity. But Psalm 113 tells us each rising of the sun brings new mercies from God.
- The Preacher says – its vanity that wind just goes around and around. But Psalm 107 says God commands the wind and tells it where to blow.
- The Preacher says – There is nothing new under the sun, and it's vanity. But Isaiah 43 tells us the Lord is doing a new thing. He's the God of what is new - a new covenant, a new creation, a new people for His own possession.

So the Preacher would point to the mundane cycle of life and say – “IT’S ALL POINTLESS AND AND MEANINGLESS.” And yet the Scriptures would invite us to point back and say – “SORT OF! But God is here.”

GK Chesterton – “Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never gotten tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”

Church, don't pretend that life under the sun is not exactly what it is – painful, cyclical, elusive, monotonous, mundane, and short. It's vanity.

But God is here. He entered life under the sun to be with us. When we discover that God is in the sacred honesty and sacred mundanity of life, we also discover the sacred gift he offers – joy.

Because, as the preacher will ask us next week – “Apart from Him who can have joy?”

Under the sun, all is vanity. But our God has come from outside the sun to teach us to live with resurrection hope.

Pray.