

**“What’s the Point of it All?”
Ecclesiastes 1:1-18**

Intro:

- The book of Ecclesiastes has been called “the most philosophical book of the OT.”
- It is a book that appears hopelessly pessimistic, but is found in the wisdom literature of the Bible.
- It is a book that crept into American culture in the 60s through the band, The Byrds with their hit song “Turn, Turn, Turn:” “To Everything (turn, turn, turn) There is a season (Turn, turn, turn) And a time to every purpose, under heaven.” You know that one right? If not, watch Forrest Gump, I’m not going to sing it, ok? I’m a rapper, not a singer...
- It is the OT book that may speak to 21st century America better than any other.
- The book of Ecclesiastes is really about pilgrim who becomes a preacher. The main character of Ecclesiastes was on a journey to discover if there is any meaning in life anything that provides ultimate and lasting satisfaction. The world that he lived in seemed so unreasonable, so he set out on a grand experiment to find meaning and purpose and satisfaction. His journey is really not that much different from ours.

FCF: In our journey through life, we are constantly looking for that which provides meaning and purpose in life. We are looking for that which satisfies! The Book of Ecclesiastes is a book that asks & answers the question: “What’s the Point of it All?” It is going to teach us that...

The Point: Every pursuit on the journey of life is pointless apart from God and his will for us.

We are going to study vv. 1-11 this morning before closing our time with vv. 12-18. The first 11 verses encourage us to ...

I. Recognize life is pointless and yields no ultimate profit apart from God (1:1-11).

Read 1-3... The first three verses set the tone for the entire book. They introduce us to the main character, his shocking assessment of the meaning of life, and what he is after in all of this. I believe these are the words of a frame narrator who writes the prologue (1:1-11) and the epilogue (12:8-14) sandwiching the autobiographical account of the Preacher in between.

Who is The Preacher?

- Verse one tells we are reading “the words,” of “The Preacher.” Who is this Preacher? The word Preacher is sometimes translated “Teacher.” Literally it means “one who assembles.” He assembles others to listen to his voice of wisdom. We could easily call him the Professor, but we’ll stick with the way the ESV translates it, “the Preacher.” This preacher is “the Son of David, king in Israel.”
- A lot of evidence points to him being King Solomon..., but on closer inspection of a few textual details, some of the autobiographical information found later in the book, and based on a linguistic analysis of the book, my lean is that “The Preacher” is a kind of “**Super-Solomon,**” supreme in wisdom and whose experiences in life surpass all before him. Thankfully, we don’t have to have a precise answer to that question. We can more than fully grasp the message of the book regardless.
- The Preacher is a wise teacher asking the huge questions of life: “Why are we here?” Is there any meaning in life? What is the reason for life under the sun?” His assessment is found in **verse 2**.

The Preacher’s Assessment of Life:

- Verse 2: “**Vanity of vanities**, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! **All is vanity.**”
- These words form the shocking thesis statement of the Preacher. He uses the most extreme words he can find. “Vanity of vanities...” Did you catch that? Ev-ree-thing... It is *all* vanity.
- The word vanity is the Hebrew word *hebel*. This word is used over *30 times* in the book. Literally, the Hebrew word means “mist” or “vapor.” The Preacher uses a symbolic word to capture an incredible depth of meaning describing his wise observations.

- Some translations, like the ESV, translate it “vanity.” Vanity here does not refer to excessive pride but that which is worthless, empty, and pointless.
- The wisdom of The Preacher is already seen in the symbolic word he chooses. By saying this life is like a mist or vapor, he is able to communicate an array of ideas depending on the context: “Vanity” can refer to that which is fleeting or ephemeral, futile, enigmatic, and unreasonable.
- Some translations, such as the NIV, translate this word as “meaningless.” We could even take him to be saying “Life is absurd. Absurdity of absurdities. Everything is absolutely absurd.” Life as he sees it is “an affront to reason.” He’s seen it all and it doesn’t add up!
- That was his assessment. This was his, and if he is correct this is our dilemma. But...

What is he after? Verse 3 -- The payoff...

In verse 3, we find what amounts to be “the programmatic question” for the whole book. In other words, this question drives the whole quest that is unpacked in the rest of the book: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun.” “What does man gain?” “Gain” here carries the idea of making a profit.

The Preacher is thirsty. He is searching for satisfaction. He is on a journey to discover what truly brings “profit” or “gain”. He is after the payoff. We almost hear him saying: “There’s gotta be something to show from all of our endeavors in life. All of our strivings, all of our busyness, all of our work, at the end of the day, *at the end of our life*, what do we have to show for it? Is there any fulfillment, any satisfaction in life?

We all want to get paid, and I’m not talking about 9yr./\$214 million dollar contracts, like the one Prince Fielder signed with the Detroit Tigers this week. We are looking for “the payoff” in life, right? I want to challenge you to ask yourself this question: In the bank account, not of your pennies and paper, but in the bank account of your life, what truly adds ultimate value to the bottom line??

Perhaps we can find some answers by looking at some of the greatest pursuits in life. Some people look to add value to the bottom line through relationships and acceptance, some may be looking for pleasure; some may define value by comfort and security; still others by prestige and accomplishments or titles & degrees. What about you? Are you looking for any of those pursuits to provide the ultimate payoff? That is what this super-Solomon is searching for, and the end of verse three informs us of the...

The Setting of his search: “under the sun”

This highlights the scope of his search. The phrase “under the sun” tells us on the one hand, that he will leave no stone unturned! On the other hand, it speaks to life in this fallen world. There is not a sacred/secular divide here that is sometimes assumed. He’s viewing the fallen world around him through the rightful lens of Genesis 1-3. God’s good creation has been plagued by our sin and the curse of the fall ever since.

Trans: So verses 1-3 set the stage for the entire book. This fallen world seems to offer nothing that will ultimately payoff in the end. It is all vanity! And he is going to illustrate the futility and pointlessness of it all in verses 4-11. It’s as if the Preacher has collected various works of art and established a Museum of Vanity. He’s going to walk us into four different exhibits to make his point. His first exhibit comes from nature.

Look at **verses 4-7**... He is arguing that the cycles of nature, from the arrival and departure of human life, to the sun, wind and waters, all point to the reality that nothing really changes. The same sun, the same cycles of wind and rain continue day after day. Nothing really changes. There is no gain.

His second exhibit, in verse 8, makes the same point, this time from the realm of individual human activity.

Verse 8. This verse is almost prophetic for what follows in Ecclesiastes. Proverbs 27:20: “never satisfied are the eyes of man.” (Go pastoral.) Here’s part of the solution to conquering lust and covetousness and greed: understand that you will never be satisfied; you will never say “enough”: it’s always that next toy, next paycheck, next lustful look, next drink, next hit, next accomplishment that promises satisfaction but never delivers on that promise. Your eyes and ears and tongue are connected to your heart and until your heart is satisfied in Jesus you will continue searching for satisfaction in the vain pursuit available to you “under the sun.” The activities of speaking, seeing, and hearing are never full because the cycle never ceases.

With his third exhibit, he speaks more directly, and draws on the *area of human experience*. He looks at human history in vv. 9-10. Ok, so these verses are not the reason Benjamin Franklin was a deist and not a Christian. These verses do not mean that invention is impossible. They speak to the general observation that all of our human experiences continue to surface in every age. The injustices we see are not new. The temptation we experience... nothing new (1 Cor. 10:13). The good things we observe around us, it's all been done before: "what has been is what will be...there is nothing new under the sun." Before we move on to the fourth exhibit, let me say that verses 4-10 also do not endorse a "circle of life" view of the world (apologies to you "Lion King" fans out there). There is no room for reincarnation in the biblical worldview and Ecclesiastes also makes this clear with its understanding of the finality of death and God's coming judgment.

Now verse 11, the fourth exhibit, and the most potent of them all. The Preacher says, "Do you want me to prove to you the vanity of this life." Step into *the realm of death*. He connects the thought of verse 11 with verse 4. I side with OT scholars who prefer the NIV's translation here: "No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them." Be encouraged, no one is going to remember jack about your life! This may be the ultimate expression of the absurdity of life: we do all that we can do, and then we die and are forgotten.

Trans: With his prologue, the frame narrator has given us "a first round, square blow to the chin—of what will be seen on page after page of what follows." I hope you are encouraged! Now in verses 12-18, we find the first words of the Preacher himself, which provide his own summary of what will follow in chapters 2-12. Like the frame narrator, the Preacher would get along well with New Englanders because he straight up tells it like it is. Check out vv 12-18 with me... Here's the challenge from 12-18. Emulate the Preacher and...

III. Test the wisdom of this book by personal experience (1:12-18)

- The King introduces himself in verse 12: "I the Preacher have been king over Israel."
- In verse 13, we discover that the King is on a quest. Look. "And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." Stop right there and consider this...
 - He is uniquely qualified for the task before him. He is a super-Solomon, one who had unique resources to search out this question of the meaning of life under the sun in a way that us common folk could not.
 - I've seen this. I've done that. I've experienced that. He balled hard in his day.
- The Preacher says "he applied his heart to seek and to search out..." He laid it all on the line to discover what life is all about. His was a wholehearted pursuit. What did he apply his heart to? "To seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven."
- He is at once a philosopher, an empiricist & experientialist. He conducted his experiment through reason, observation and experience. He says: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun."
- What we discover in Ecclesiastes is that this is not the cry of someone detached from reality. These are the observations of a man at the end of his rope who has tasted of the vanity of this world.
- Even the search for meaning itself was like a boulder on his back. Look at the end of verse 13: "It is an unhappy business (some translations say "heavy burden") that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."
- His conclusion? "Behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind." What a potent picture! Finding ultimate meaning in anything in this life is like trying to catch the wind: an empty and elusive pursuit. **Verse 15** says that this is just the way this mysterious world is: "What is..."
- **Pastoral App:** As we consider these heavy words, please notice that these are not the words of some pagan King who had no regard for God. These are the words of the King of Israel, someone who belonged to the covenant community but still had serious questions and doubt.
- If you are here and you consider yourself a Christian... let me tell you that followers of Jesus are not exempt from wrestling and struggling, and yes, even doubting God and his ways in the world at times, sometime difficult stretches where it just doesn't seem to add up.

Well, in **verses 16-18**, he begins to tell part of his story... (Read) In an introductory fashion, that he will explain more in the next chapter he says, though his wisdom is unsurpassed, even the pursuit of wisdom is vanity and a striving after the wind. Ignorance is not bliss, according to the preacher. The more we know, the greater the potential for sorrow and vexation. Students, please do not go home and tell your parents the pastor at the new church told me to drop out of school!

This is only a small preview of where we're going: Wisdom. Check. Riches & Possessions. Check. Women and Sex. Check. Food and Drink. Check. Work & Accomplishments. Check. It's all vanity, a striving after the wind.

So why on earth is this pessimistic, depressing book in the Bible!?! 1) Ecclesiastes is not a pessimistic book. It is a realistic book. The Preacher is truly a wise teacher with much wisdom to teach the children of man. 2) To understand Ecclesiastes you really have to read the whole story.... Let's fast forward to Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." The Hebrew is emphatic: "Indeed, *this* is the whole duty of man." Where do we find meaning in this life? Where can we find satisfaction? Where will our freedom from vanity be found? Answer. Fearing God & Keeping his commands.

Application to Close:

We're all on a journey. In some form or fashion we are all seeking an answer to the question we find in Ecclesiastes 1. What is the point of it all? Is there any meaning in life? Any satisfaction? Is there any ultimate profit or reward to life under the sun?

Most people live life under the false assumption as they look out into the world, that... *My life would be complete, if I only had* more money, a better job, a family, acceptance, recognition. As we will see as we make our way through this series, the Preacher played that game, and he lost every time! He was never satisfied!!

The question of Ecclesiastes 1:3 ("what does man gain from all his toil under the sun"), is very similar to a question Jesus posed to those who wanted to follow him. If the Preacher is presented as a super-Solomon, in Jesus we have one who is "greater than Solomon" to use his own words in Mt. 12:42. In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). So he asks in Luke 9:25: "**What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?**" (Luke 9:25) What was the impetus for this question? The words he says before it: Listen, Jesus says in **Luke 9:23-24: "If anyone would come..."**

We could put the theology of Ecclesiastes overtop these words of Jesus and it would go something like this: "Listen I know you are searching for meaning and satisfaction in life. I know you've tried so many different pursuits, but you've come up empty handed every time. Follow me. But here are the conditions: deny, die, and follow. For whoever would seek to save his life and find ultimate meaning in the empty pursuits of this life, that person is going to lose it all!, but whoever would lose his life, abandon the pursuit of finding meaning, satisfaction, and pleasure in the things of this world apart from and lose your life for my sake, you will save it, you will find it, for in finding me you find it all. I am the point of it all!

Gospel Invitation: Let the words of Jesus to the women at the well, be his words to you this morning: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Jn 4:13-14)

One of my friends, who is a pastor in France makes this point in a song he wrote on the book of Ecclesiastes. We'll close with the last verse of his song: "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity. Hear the preacher's cry: He's the answer to man's need, the Son of God lived despised in the world of Adam's corrupted seed. And we all like sheep have gone astray; we've turned every one to his own way, but Jesus suffered in our place and justified many for God's praise. So when the world cries out "vanity!" Jesus cries, "All the thirsty come to me." By his stripes we are healed, the wounded wisdom of God revealed, and in Jesus our freedom from vanity is sealed."