

Ecclesiastes 1:1-15

The World is Not Enough

When you love someone you will tell them the truth, always, even if it hurts. Here is the truth: the world is not enough. It never has been and never will be. That is the main point of the book of Ecclesiastes. The title of the book is Greek and refers to someone who searches for information and wisdom and then presents it to an assembly or congregation of people. The Hebrew title is Qoheleth and can be translated as the Preacher. And our preacher is Solomon.

Solomon took an extensive, exploratory journey through life. He was searching for life's meaning and purpose. He was searching for the answers to questions such as "Why is life so difficult? Why is there so little joy? Why are we here and where do we find real, solid satisfaction, happiness and contentment?" Although this book was written many centuries ago people are still asking the same questions.

So Solomon calls us together and says to us, "here is the wisdom I've discovered about life." But the message of Ecclesiastes is not just from the mind of Solomon. It is our deep conviction as Christians that the Bible, all of it from genesis to Revelation, is the Word and message from God to us. We believe this because this is what the Bible reveals to us. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we are told,

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness

Doctrine teaches us what to believe and how we are to live. Reproof shows us where our thinking and behavior is wrong. And correction puts us back on track. Ecclesiastes does all of this with the wisdom it presents. But it is not so much a wisdom that nourishes us, as a wisdom that scrubs us clean.

It scrubs us clean from false ideals and false hopes. It scrubs us clean from worldly values that promise us everything but delivers nothing. The preacher asks tough questions and makes sobering and bold statements. He scrubs us clean by making us really look at life "under the sun," that is life from a purely naturalistic and materialistic perspective—life without God. Solomon will use that phrase, "under the sun" often along with "vanity of vanities." I'll explain that phrase in a moment. So let's hear the truth.

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in

Jerusalem.² “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher;
“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”
(Ecclesiastes 1:1, 2)

In the Hebrew language a word or phrase is used twice or more in a row for impact, to make a superlative. For example the phrase “holy of holies” means the most holy place. When the angels worship God and say “Holy, holy, holy”¹ they are calling God the ultimate holy being.

Having returned from his exploration of the meaning of life, Solomon steps up to the pulpit. All eyes are on him and he said. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Here is what he meant. The Hebrew word translated vanity is *hebel* and it means a wisp of vapor. It is the frost of your breath that you can see on a cold day for a second and then it's gone. Vanity is a desperate word. It is what life is like under the sun, without God. It is a vapor of frost that soon disappears.

God told Adam in Genesis 3 “for out of [the ground] you were taken: for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” We read in Psalm 144:4 “Man is like a breath: his days are like a passing shadow.” Everything in life is vanity—here today and gone tomorrow. Ask someone who is ninety about life and they will tell you that it is too short. You may be a strong athlete today, but tomorrow that strength will be gone. You may be famous today, but tomorrow you will be forgotten.

Life is short and then you die. When you die there will be a funeral. You may have 2 people or 2000 people in attendance. But right after the funeral they'll go out for lunch. Then they will rush back to work, because someone was covering for them while they took the morning off. That night they will go home to their families and watch the game or a sit-com² on television. In time you will be a distant memory and then forgotten altogether.

Right now you're thinking, “Gee, Chuck, I sure am glad that I came to church today! This is so refreshing and uplifting. This is just what I needed to start the New Year.” Solomon has just given us the theme of his sermon and it is discouraging and depressing. But he is speaking the truth and truth is often hard to take. But Jesus said that the truth will make you free.³ Now in verse 3 the preacher asks a question that will help us to understand what he means by “vanity.”

¹ Isaiah 6:3

² A “sit-com” is short for a television program that is a situation comedy.

³ John 8:32

What profit has a man from all his labor
In which he toils under the sun?
(Ecclesiastes 1:3)

All of us know what the word “profit” means. In the business world it is the money you have left after all of the expenses and employees are paid. From the perspective of life under the sun, without God, whatever happiness, fulfillment, pleasure, glory, meaning or purpose you find, it is not enough. You win the Super Bowl but the game goes on next year. The word is not enough. After all of life is done and all the bills are paid, what do I have left? What can I take with me? There are no trailers behind hearses.

One generation passes away, and *another* generation
comes;
But the earth abides forever.
(Ecclesiastes 1:4)

You are born and you live your life. You go to school, you work, you love, you fear, you laugh and you cry. But the day comes when you are gone. It is like walking across the sand leaving footprints, but the wind erases them as if you were never there. Under the sun, we are all bankrupt. We were meant to be forever, but it seems only the earth remains.

The sun also rises, and the sun goes down,
And hastens to the place where it arose.
6 The wind goes toward the south,
And turns around to the north;
The wind whirls about continually,
And comes again on its circuit.
7 All the rivers run into the sea,
Yet the sea *is* not full;
To the place from which the rivers come,
There they return again.
(Ecclesiastes 1:5-7)

The preacher’s point is this: when we die the sun will rise and set the next day. The oceans will tide and the wind will blow. But our worst and best days under the sun will fade away. Both our celebrations and our tragedies will disappear. Nature almost mocks us with its cruel indifference. And what meaning and purpose can we find in the face of the impersonal cosmos?

Evolution has such a powerful pull on the secular mind because it provides an out. Evolution says, “Don’t worry about who you are? Don’t worry about meaning and purpose, because you don’t matter. Do what you want now

because you are a cosmic accident." But deep in our hearts we know that is wrong. We know we matter. We are more than an accident. So we look for hope, but in the wrong places.

All things *are* full of labor;
Man cannot express it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor the ear filled with hearing.
(Ecclesiastes 1:8)

Life at times makes us bone-tired. When Solomon wrote "man cannot express it" he meant that on our own we cannot figure life out. Why should she die? She was so sweet. Why should he prosper? He's wicked. Why the tornado and the tsunami? Where is the justice in this incident? It is impossible for finite man to find infinite meaning in a finite world. And so we see and hear and do and still want more. Like a child two days after Christmas we tire and want more. And we rush off to hear or to see some "new" promise from the world. But what did Jesus say?

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal...But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [that you need] things shall be added to you.⁴

Added to you—that is a profit.

That which has been *is* what will be,
That which *is* done is what will be done,
And *there is* nothing new under the sun.
¹⁰ Is there anything of which it may be said,
"See, this *is* new" ?
It has already been in ancient times before us.
¹¹ *There is* no remembrance of former *things*,
Nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come
By *those* who will come after.
(Ecclesiastes 1:9-11)

The preacher is not claiming that there is **nothing** new. There were no cars or airplanes when Solomon lived. There were no computers or smart phones. But there is no work, no philosophy, no political ideal, no new scientific discovery, there is no new thing (under the sun) that will bring you what you really need.

⁴ Matthew 6:19, 33

We've been there and done that. The history books are full of our folly! It is only because there is no remembrance of former things that there is an illusion that there is something that will not be in vain. The truth is the more things change the more they remain the same.

I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
¹³ And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. ¹⁴ I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind.
(Ecclesiastes 1:12-14)

Solomon states that he worked hard to understand life under the sun. And it is a burdensome task given by God to the sons of man. The phrase "sons of man" from the Hebrew is literally the "sons of Adam." This means the search for meaning was given to all of us as a consequence of sin.

Think about this: Adam had no philosophical problems in Eden before he sinned. He walked with God. He knew why creation was here. He knew why he was here. He understood the dignity of both men and women as the image bearer of God. But then he sinned and the lights went out. On our own we are in the dark about life. Years ago, in my youth, Bob Dylan sang,

How many roads must a man walk down before he
knows he's a man? How any times must the cannon
balls fly, before they are forever banned?

Dylan's answer was the same as Solomon's—"The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind." Under the sun, without God, we are incapable of fixing what is wrong in life or adding what is needed.

*What is crooked cannot be made straight,
And what is lacking cannot be numbered.*
(Ecclesiastes 1:15)

Our world is fundamentally flawed and we cannot fix it. In spite of mankind's greatest efforts some crooked matters will remain unchanged. The world as it is does not have what it takes.

If all of this sounds hopeless to you then Solomon is achieving his purpose. Remember he is describing the world "under the sun", apart from God. If we live life from a secular, worldly mind-set we will never escape the pain of Ecclesiastes

1. Study all the philosophies, research all the religions, take all the human improvement courses that you can and life will still be “vanity,” a vapor that is here one second and gone the next. Human wisdom as marvelous as it is will only take us so far. This is why the Creator, God, Yahweh, the Almighty told the prophet Jeremiah,

Thus says the LORD:

“Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom,

Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might,

Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches;

²⁴ But let him who glories glory in this,

That he understands and knows Me,

That I *am* the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these I delight,” says the LORD.

(Jeremiah 9:23, 24)

One day our world will be different. God has promised this and He will keep His promise.⁵ Solomon asks, “Is there anything of which it may be said, ‘See, this is new?’” With God the answer is “Yes” because one man, Jesus Christ, delighted to know and to love God. One man was born, lived, died, but then the flat line jumped, because God raised him up from the dead to die no more. God offers this everlasting life to us by faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible declares that if anyone is in Christ by faith then he or she “is a new creation.”⁶ As Christians we are destined for an eternal age when God will make all things new.⁷ This is why Scripture proclaims that only in the Lord is our labor not in vain.⁸ What you do here matters—if your labor is for the Lord, at work, at home, in the church, wherever, because the world is not enough.

⁵ Revelation 21:1-5

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁷ Revelation 21:5

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:58