

## **All is Vanity Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

### **Intro**

As I began to work through my preparation for this series in Ecclesiastes and for this sermon, I opened a very fine book by Sidney Greidanus called Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes and I was immediately struck by this first sentence of the book.

### **Ecclesiastes may be the most difficult book to interpret and preach. (Greidanus)**

Oh, great what have I got myself into?

Here is why:

- We aren't sure about the author of this book. Maybe you grew up being taught that this is King Solomon but it we just aren't sure and there are indicators in this book that it isn't him - we don't know.
- This book is ancient wisdom literature and is unlike logical progressions say in an epistle of Paul's. It is in a category with for instance Proverbs.
- There is no clear consensus on the structure or if there is an intended structure at all.
- Is the "Preacher" in v. 1 - the author optimistic in his writing or pessimistic?
- It is a sweeping blend of proverb, reflection, instruction, autobiographical narrative, anecdotes, metaphors, and allegory and without any prophecies concerning the coming of Jesus Christ.

### **Small wonder that many preachers consider it the better part of wisdom to omit Ecclesiastes from their preaching schedule. (Greidanus)**

Oh, my friends quite the opposite - it would be foolish to impoverish ourselves of the content of this divinely inspired book of OT Scripture for though written thousands of years ago likely in the 3rd century before Christ it contains in it massively relevant wisdom for making sense of our lives in this world.

Ecclesiastes gets underneath what makes us human and our search for meaning and significance

**If we stand back to ask what we have learned about happiness over the centuries, it is striking to see our lack of progress. Think of how we have surpassed our ancestors in our ability to travel and communicate, in our accomplishments in medicine and science. Think of how much less brutal and unjust to minorities many societies are today compared with even one hundred years ago. In so many ways human life has been transformed, and yet though**

**we are unimaginably wealthier and more comfortable than our ancestors, no one is arguing that we are significantly happier than they were. We are struggling and seeking happiness in essentially the same ways our forebears did and doing a worse job of it, if we use the rise of depression and suicide as an indicator. (Tim Keller)**

We can dress up and convince ourselves of the significance of many things for our lives but apart from a God-centered, God honoring life - it is all a mirage. But if God is in the center of our lives, then this world becomes to us full of good gifts that we enjoy but not as a means to our ultimate joy or significance. An invitation to enjoy this world in the right way.

THIS IS NOT PAUL! Incredibly relevant as the Preacher struggles and sees happiness and fulfillment and meaning in this world.

The Preacher had the resources and access to avail himself of every opportunity to find fulfillment, meaning, and significance in this world and he returns to report back on what he found.

This is not the kind of book that lends itself to quoting a verse here and there

**And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. (Ecclesiastes 4:2)**

Not exactly the stuff of Hallmark cards

it is truly understood as a whole and within the whole of Scripture

We are jumping into the middle of the storyline of the history of humanity and redemption between Genesis and Eden and Revelation and new heavens and new earth

Our text. No mention of God. This is what this wise man observes in a world where God is not central and where God is not glorified

What we have here is a secular worldview where God is isn't present and where meaning and significance are stripped away from our lives - let's look straight into the eyes of this text so that honestly acknowledge our need for grace as we long for the meaning and significance that only God can give us.

Three main observations:

- I. Life is a breath
- II. Our desires are never fulfilled
- III. We are insignificant

## I. Life is a Breath

- A. V. 1 the author of this book is introduced as the Preacher - actually it appears that someone else is helping get his thoughts down - not in the 1st person
- B. Koholeth - assembler - Greek ecclesia - the gathering - Preacher or teacher who addresses a gathering
- C. Son of David - king in Jerusalem - may be Solomon but can simply mean - son of David can simply mean descended from David - To be sure he is calling to mind an association with that most wise and prosperous king of Israel Solomon
  - 1. Wise above all kings of Israel - fabulously wealthy - tribute paid in tons of gold - 1,000 wives - this guy had access to everything this world has to offer

**He pictures for us a super-Solomon to demonstrate that the most gifted man conceivable, who could outstrip every king who ever occupied the throne of David, would still return empty-handed from the quest for self-fulfillment. (Derek Kidner)**

- D. V. 2 the preacher engaged in the quest for self-fulfillment - presents us with essentially the thesis - the main premise of this book - vanity of vanities - vanity of vanities - all is vanity
  - 1. Vanity not in the sense of staring at the mirror admiring yourself - your so vain you probably think this sermon is about you
  - 2. The word used here means literally a breath - HA - fleeting, empty
    - a) Apart from the presence of a Creator who has a plan and purpose for this world - let's be honest - life is simply an enigmatic and brief blip on the radar of a world created purely by chance and devoid of meaning - a random and brief and fleeting breath
      - (1) We can pretend if we like but the stark truth remains

**Illustration:** Young adults - teens - you likely don't believe it - I'm 44 and am shocked as I find myself referencing things I did in my teens a quarter century ago. It flies by it truly does

- E. The Preacher turns his attention to work - what does a man (woman) gain by all his toil under the sun - literally laborious labor
  - 1. Under the sun - 30x - observable world
  - 2. Ah here we find this to be a question that naturally rises from living in a world under the curse - work is good - work is a gift - toil and heavy labor is not

**[17] And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; [18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. [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.” (Genesis 3:17-19)**

3. We work and toil throughout our lives - What do we ultimately gain from all of the toil? Nothing ultimately. We toil, we labor throughout our lives and within a breath of time - we're gone

**Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow. (Psalm 144:4)**

4. He goes a level deeper

## **II. Our Desires Are Never Fulfilled**

- A. v. 4-7 the Preacher turns to the cycles of history and nature in poetic fashion
  1. Generation goes another one comes - on repeat - the earth remains forever - we come and go the earth moves on without much notice
  2. Sun rises, sun goes down - hastens back to do it all again - day flows into night and back into day - on repeat
  3. Wind blows south and to the north and around and around on repeat
  4. Streams run into the sea but the sea doesn't overflow - if streams are trying to fill and overflow the sea, they aren't succeeding
    - a) The cycles and processes of this world proceed in repetition - day after day - year after year - millennia after millennia
  5. All things are full weariness - so much so that man hardly has words to express it
    - a) Our eyes are full but not satisfied
    - b) Our ears are filled with noise but never satisfied
      - (1) All joys are fleeting - our satisfaction never finally arrives
- B. So, nature and mankind are engaged in much activity but there is not resolution - everything is on repeat and we still haven't found what we're looking for - we crave satisfaction - we crave meaning - in a random world created by chance and left to ourselves - all of this is elusive
  1. We are left with a world full of craving and desire - trying to fill the void with the things in this world

2. Good things - family, friends, noble activity
  - a) Accumulation of money and the finer things in life
  - b) Consuming mind-altering substances and porn - crisis - secular - crushing people left and right
  - c) Building our online personas to impress others - selfie after selfie after selfie - get the lighting just right
  
- C. None of this delivers to us the satisfaction we ultimately desire - if being honest none of it ultimately means much of anything in this brief and fleeting breath of life of our existence in a world that marches on day after day after day and will continue to do so when we are long gone
  
- D. v. 9-10 what has been is what will be, what has been done is what will be done and there is nothing new under the sun - fatalism - answers the objection - hey look this is a new thing - nope it has already been
  1. The Preacher isn't naive enough to think that there aren't new inventions - NEW THINGS EVERY DAY BITCOIN
  2. Not talking about the internet or cellphones - new things are basically new variations on old themes - nothing new to break the cycle of unfilled desire - nothing new to ultimately satisfy us - VR and gene editing

**Illustration:** Getting a new iPhone - excitement - completely take it for granted within a month - walking around with your cracked screen

3. One commentator - new baby no it's just another baby - a new war no it's actually just another war
4. We continue to look for bigger and better - in the end these are just better ways to escape and attempt to control our worlds and bring meaning - goes down another level

### III. We are Insignificant

- A. v. 11 There is no and there will be no remembrance of things that have already happened or of things that are yet come - among those who come after
  1. Not that even the most vocal atheist can do great good to others in this world
  2. The ultimate insignificance of our lives - apart from a few - the Julias Caesars and George Washingtons of this world - in the grand scheme of things we live for a breath - a moment and die and are utterly forgotten - v. 4 a generation comes and a generation goes - wash, rinse, and repeat

**Illustration:** “the greatest generation” - youngest alive is 94 - I don’t even know the names of my great-grandparents on my dad’s side and know virtually nothing not even the names when I go back another generation.

- B. You are only one of 7.5 billion people alive right now out of the estimated 107 billion who ever lived - and SNAP it’s over and forgotten - 100 years from now we won’t even be a thought in the minds of our descendants apart from genealogy websites
- C. What the Preacher is unfolding is the stark, unyielding truth if this world is all there is and we are put here simply by random coincidence - chance or accident - we can make up our meaning - if honest - we are left with nihilism

**Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance. (Sartre)**

- 1. In this kind of world devoid of actual meaning and existence - anything goes - the greatest kinds of evil can be justified - in other words if the evolution of the kind that Darwin first proposed - that we are random collection of chemicals coming together and with time and happenstance we descended from blobs of tissue and animal life - then life has only meaning that we make up and assign to it - we are playing make believe
- 2. Historian Paul Johnson connected the dots between this view of reality and the cruel and murderous oppression of communist regimes in places like Cambodia one university professor writes

**When Paul Johnson states that “In the twentieth century, it is likely that over 100 million people were killed or starved to death as a result of totalitarian regimes infected with varieties of social Darwinism,” he is essentially correct. (Michael Flannery - U of Alabama)**

- 3. People then are simply objects to be moved around and disposed of in the pursuit of power - there is no significance to life - while horrible this is the natural conclusion
  - a) Survival of the fittest - kill or be killed
- D. This is secular realism - ok - hit the release valve

**This side of eternity, life is a breath. We do the same things over and over again in a world repeating itself over and over again, and then we die, only to be followed by our children who will do the same things in the same way and then meet the same end. Being a Christian doesn’t stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn’t true. (David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*)**

## E. Application

1. We hear and understand the observations of the Preacher but we don't need to pretend - no we can get honest and realistic as we hear the words of Christ - when the Preacher what does a man gain by all of his toil under the sun - we hear Jesus go a level deeper

### **For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)**

2. We know because God has spoken that we are more than random - we are Created by God for his glory - As we bring God back into the picture, we find our existence utterly transformed - life, meaning, joy, significance flows into reality - this life under the sun is not all there is - are hearts are restless UNTIL we find our rest in God - AUGUSTINE
3. There is newness of life that has entered into the humdrum of ordinary existence - as the Son of God entered into this world to redeem us through his atoning death - rescuing us from the curse of sin and the judgment we have earned for our sin - delivering us out of fatalism - indeed death itself through his death and resurrection so that we can say

### **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)**

4. And this newness of life will not stop coming until all of this world - laboring under the curse - toiling in futility is redeemed - BACK TO ROMANS

### **[20] For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope [21] that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21)**

5. And in all of this - Jesus gives to us identity as he loves us and gives life, meaning, and significance as children of God - TO ALL WHO PUT THEIR FAITH IN HIM.
6. There is meaningful and significant and lasting work for all of us

### **[19] "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, [20] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. [21] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)**

7. Oh this life is brief but it matters - it matters to God - and every effort for God's glory done in faith matters big time

**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. (1 Corinthians 15:58)**

- a) VANITY - Everything in your life done to the glory of God has great significance
- b) Changing diapers and bath time to the glory of God!
- c) Making meals and changing oil to the glory of God
- d) Sharing the gospel with a co-worker - WE HAVE GOOD NEWS

**Zinzendorf - preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten - but not by God!**

**(1) CHURCH PLANTING - YOUNG ADULTS TO THE NATIONS**

- e) Turning away from temptation by the grace of God - sacrificing your time to serve others - it's not empty
- f) OUR SENIOR SAINTS - YOU HAVE FRUITFUL WORK
- g) PRAISE GOD THAT HE HAS CREATED US AND REDEEMED US!

**Close**

Ecclesiastes is all about realism this is all true in a world apart from God but for us - oh for us we rejoice in the grace of God - bringing glory to God with our lives!

Only one life will soon be past - this is your moment! Let's press into faithfulness with more zeal than we've ever had.

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