

Up in Smoke

Please turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. If you aren't familiar with Ecclesiastes it's a pretty serious book. Some would even say it's depressing. It opens up by saying that everything is utterly meaningless and then it goes downhill from there. My wife asked why we're going through Ecclesiastes near the end of winter when everyone already has the winter blues. It's a fair question. I'll admit I've been a little nervous about this series, because I know it holds the potential of being a bit of a Debbie Downer.

But in defense of Ecclesiastes, it was one of Herman Melville's favorite bible books, quoted several times in his novel Moby Dick. And we all remember the Byrd's #1 hit song "Turn, Turn, Turn" which is quoted almost word for word from Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

The fact is Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book, written from a fascinating perspective. It's a book that speaks to today's materialistic culture that is obsessed with success but tends to define success in terms of money or prestige or possessions or popularity or some other right here, right now measurement. In a time when more and more people believe that the natural sciences explain everything and are confident that there's nothing above or beyond what can be observed and explained scientifically, Ecclesiastes speaks to the dilemma that sets up in our hearts. If this is all there is, if there is nothing more, then what is the meaning of life? What do our lives ultimately matter? Ecclesiastes has deeply honest answers, though not very cheerful ones.

On a personal level, if you have ever struggled with the meaning of life, if you have ever felt like something was missing but you just couldn't put your finger on it, or with this deep dissatisfaction that, no matter what you tried to fill it with, was never satisfied for long, before that dissatisfaction was back again, Ecclesiastes has something to say to you. If you have ever wondered, does my life matter? Does anything I'm doing really make any difference? This book speaks honestly to those questions and when we understand the perspective of Ecclesiastes and how its message fits with the bigger message of the Bible, I think we will find our hearts encouraged and uplifted in unexpected ways. So let's ask God's blessing on this time in His word and then we'll jump in.

Let me give you a quick overview of Ecclesiastes:

- It was written by King Solomon and is one of the five wisdom books in the Bible: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Job, and Ecclesiastes.
- Wisdom is the art of living skillfully, the life lived well, in harmony with God and the laws and principles that God has built into creation.
- Proverbs speaks in pretty absolute terms about the consequences of wisdom: if you live wisely, you'll be blessed and have success. If you don't, you'll be cursed and your life will come to ruins. Wisdom leads to blessing, success, riches, a great life, a great reputation, a great family, and a growing 401K. That's the message of Proverbs.
- Ecclesiastes comes along and says, "wait a minute. It doesn't always work exactly like that. There's a glitch in the system. Sometimes the wicked do wrong and seem to skate and the righteous do right and end up in a world of hurt. Not only that, ultimately everyone seems to come to the same end - death - anyway."

- The book of Job then takes us behind the scenes to see that there are things going on that we have no idea about, and that life is too complicated for us to ever fully understand and we need to trust God with those hard to understand things.

With that brief overview in mind, let's begin working our way through Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 (I'm reading from the NIV this morning)

The words of the Teacher,^[a] son of David, king in Jerusalem:

When Solomon, son of David, was a young king just starting out God appeared to him and offered to give him anything he asked for. Solomon didn't ask God for money or power or fame, he asked God for wisdom. He said, make me wise so I can lead this people well, and that pleased God and He made Solomon the wisest man who ever lived (apart from Jesus) as well as blessing him with wealth and power and fame. So we are about to hear what this wisest of all men has to say to us:

² *"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."*

What?!? Is that really the best the wisest man in the world can do? C'mon Solomon, no wonder no one reads your book, when you open it like that. Throughout the ages millions of people have turned to the Bible to give hope and meaning to their lives, and yet here's Solomon saying that everything is meaningless. Not just meaningless, utterly meaningless!! The point of the sermon this morning is that your life is meaningless, my life is meaningless, our jobs are meaningless, our families are meaningless, church is meaningless, this service is meaningless, every single thing about your life is utterly meaningless! Now, have nice day.

But wait a minute. We know that can't exactly be what Solomon is saying. He knew God, he spoke with God, he was the one who wrote "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", he knew the great redemptive history of Israel and the mighty acts of God on behalf of his people. So how do we understand this somber book with its seemingly hopeless message?

The Hebrew word translated *meaningless* is the word *heber* and it means mist or vapor. Life is a vapor. It's like a cloud, or a puff of smoke, here for a moment and then gone. Solomon isn't saying that life has no meaning so much as he's saying, life is elusive, it's enigmatic, it's mysterious. Have you ever lied on the grass in summer and looked for shapes in the clouds? You see a dinosaur or a person, but after a couple minutes the wind starts to distort the shape, and before long it's unrecognizable, and then it's gone. That's life. It's like blowing a smoke ring - it's visible, looks solid, but you can't grasp it. Life is like that.

Ecclesiastes 1:3-9

*What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?*

⁴ *Generations come and generations go,*

but the earth remains forever.
⁵ *The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.*
⁶ *The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.*
⁷ *All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.*
⁸ *All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.*
⁹ *What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.*

I want you to notice the phrase in verse 3 and repeated in verse 9: *under the sun*. This phrase is not found anywhere else in the Bible, but Solomon repeats it 29 times in this book. Using all his wisdom Solomon is going to look hard at this vapor, this puff of smoke called life, and explore every possible way that people can try to find meaning and purpose for their life. But this is key: he's looking at it purely from an earth-bound perspective. He's going to take a hard look at life totally through "under the sun" glasses. He will eventually bring God into it, and as we go through this series we will always inject the hope of Christ, but it's important to understand that he's trying to examine life through the eyes of an atheist, a naturalist, a person who believes this life is all there is, and says that even though this life is all there is, we can find meaning and purpose in the short time we're here on earth. Solomon pushes that to its logical end points to arrive at the conclusion, "if all we see under the sun is all there is, then everything is meaningless. Everything is vapor. Everything eventually goes up in smoke."

The wearisome cycle of life

The first thing he observes is the endless, wearisome cycle of life. What good is it to go to work and work long hours? You will just have to get up and do it again tomorrow. It's like we're on this endless loop and the only thing that breaks it is death. Generations come and generations go, but the earth just trudges on.

The sun rises and sets. Day after day after day after day. It's so predictable. The wind blows to the south, turns to the north, and round and round it keeps going. Streams flow into the sea endlessly, which then evaporates and returns in rain, which fills the streams, which then flow into the sea.

There's an endless cycle to life. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... the same thing over and over and over again.

GCC began held its first service in August, 2003. And with very few exceptions we have had a church service every Sunday since then. Ever notice that week after week we meet, we sing, we have announcements, we used to have a five minute break, now we don't, (there's something new!), then we hear a message, then we go home. Then we come back the next week! Over and over again. And after service we all eat lunch. And then dinner. And then breakfast tomorrow. And so on.

And then at night we'll all turn in and go to sleep. Ever notice we do that pretty much every night? It's an endless cycle. You'll get up tomorrow and do your job, maybe clean out your inbox by the end of the day, and think, "man, what a great day!" and then the next day, the inbox is full again and you have to do it all over again. You think you're getting ahead, and then you're right back where you started. What do you gain for all your labor? You clean the house, do the dishes, get the laundry done, weed the garden, and then...the house is dirty, the dishes are piling up, the dirty laundry is starting to stink, and the weeds are taking over the garden again. Our work keeps needing to be done over and over and over again and it never stays done.

And Solomon observes that built into it is a bone deep wearisome-ness. This is more than end of a long day tiredness. It's the tiredness you feel when you wake up and realize that you have to do it all again, and wonder, "what's it for? What good is any of it doing?"

So we search for something new that will inject the excitement, the meaning, the purpose that we long for. But that's a dead end too:

Ecclesiastes 1:10-

*¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.*

We try to find meaning in new. I got a new iPhone 8 months ago...which means it's not a new iPhone anymore. Everything we get, everything we do, everywhere we go, it's new for a short time, and then it's not.

Whatever new thing you found: it was here a long time ago. Every generation thinks it's the generation that's figured out this thing. Millennials, you might be tempted to think that you're more enlightened than the generations that came before you. You've got it figured out. And you can't help but shake your head at the silly things your parent's generation believes and does.

I thought that too when I was your age. And the generation before me thought that when they were at that point. In time you will get older and there will be a generation coming up behind you and they'll think

you're the out of touch, outdated ones. There's nothing new - just the same stuff recycled over and over again.

This isn't to say that it's wrong to want to try new things in life. Getting a new job, making new friends, taking up a new hobby, moving to a new place, etc - these can all be good and healthy things as a natural part of life, but when we think new will change our lives or automatically be better just because they're new, eventually the new isn't new and we'll be disappointed. Solomon says, actually nothing under the sun is new. It's been done before, thought before, said before, tried before, and it will be done, think, said, and tried again. There is this tiresome recycling of life going on endlessly.

*¹¹ No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.*

Do you know your great-great-grandparents? Probably not. Chances are you don't know anything about them. You might know a little about them if you come from a pretty coherent family, but you don't really know them or remember anything about them or their lives. There's a good chance that no one on earth remembers them. Once they lived lives just like we're living now, laughing, eating, loving, working their jobs, stressing over their problems. But they're gone and the world has moved on. It's as if they didn't exist. And your grandparents will pass away and your children won't remember them, and so on. One day, we won't be here, but more sobering is that no one will remember that we ever lived or remember anything about us. One day even those who haven't come yet will have lived and died and they won't be remembered. The endless cycle of life swallows up everything in its wearisome sameness and there is nothing new under the sun.

OK, so by now you're thinking, I came to church for this? I could've been doing something fun like getting a root canal this morning. Let's bring this thing in for a landing and then inject a higher hope into the discussion.

The great experiment

And so Solomon reveals this great experiment that he decides to conduct, using his wisdom to impartially and objectively evaluate the meaning of life:

*¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³ I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is **done under the heavens**. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done **under the sun**; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

*¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.*

¹⁶ I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

*¹⁸ For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.*

Solomon realizes that he's wiser than anyone before him, more powerful, richer, and has every advantage in life. And so he decides that he is going to use his power and wealth in a great experiment: he is going to try everything from wisdom to madness to folly to pleasure to hard work, and all the while he's going to observe using his God-given wisdom, and write down what he observes. Even when he tries madness, even when he lives foolishly, he's going to wisely observe the results. This book, Ecclesiastes, is his observation of the meaning of life under the sun.

And we might wonder, what's this book even doing in the Bible? The Bible is all about hope, about God, about redemption, about meaning and purpose, about eternity, about a kingdom that lasts forever, about lives that make a difference for eternity. Yes, but Solomon would remind us, that all that hope, all that redemptive purpose and meaning, doesn't originate under the sun. It comes from beyond the sun, above the sun. It comes from Jesus leaving heaven and descending to this earth in order to rescue us from the hopelessness of this circular silliness.

In Christ, there is something new under the sun because it comes from above the sun. We are given a new birth, we are made into new creations, we are given a new heart. Solomon says that all our toil under the sun is in vain, it's meaningless, it's vapor. Our lives, and our work is destined to go up in smoke.

But in Christ, Paul writes this hopeful truth: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.* 1 Cor. 15:58. He's probably thinking of Ecclesiastes as he wrote that. Is he contradicting Ecclesiastes? No, because the work of the Lord reaches above and beyond the sun to Christ's eternal kingdom.

If this world was a closed system, nothing more than life under the sun, then you will search in vain for meaning. Oh, some things might seem meaningful in the moment, but Solomon takes it to its logical end-

point and reveals that whatever meaning we invest in it is meaningless because we are meaningless. If this is all there is.

Christ came to tell us that there is so much more. He came to give us newness of life, abundant life. He came with a message from our heavenly Father who is infinitely higher than the sun, that we are loved and cherished by God. He came to give his life so that we might have eternal life. And he rose from the dead to show us that this life doesn't end in the grave, but for all who believe in Christ, death is just the beginning of new life. He came to give us a hope that reaches far, far beyond the sun.

If you have never put your trust in Christ, I urge you not to wait. Ask him to be your Savior today. Let's pray.