

During May and June, I am preaching through a sermon series called “How Long, O Lord?” about suffering, loss, lament, and trust. Certainly many of you or your loved ones are experiencing all kinds of suffering over the past few months – injustice, violence, unemployment, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and of course the death of loved ones. There are many ways you can respond to suffering and loss, but the way that the Bible gives us is lament. Lament is “a prayer in pain that leads to trust,” as Mark Vroegop defines it in his book “Dark clouds, deep mercy.” It consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. In these movements, we resist the temptation to turn away from God in anger or to turn to other people or even addictions or substances to deal with our hurt. We refuse to stuff down our emotions, on the one hand, or to be overcome by them, on the other hand. We do not simply resign ourselves to what has happened to us as our fate, but we ask boldly for what it is we need. And in the end, we choose to trust in God, that whether or not He gives us what we ask for, he is still good, and still loves us, and can be trusted.

This morning I want to look at the first few chapters of a very unique Old Testament book called Ecclesiastes and what it has to tell us about **lamenting the futility of life**. While Ecclesiastes is not technically a lament, many of the elements of lament are there, especially the voicing your complaint, and I think you will find it very helpful. **Futility, in case you're unfamiliar with the term, is defined in the dictionary as pointlessness or uselessness.** It's Sisyphus of Greek mythology, forever pushing the boulder up the hill, only to have it fall back down again. Futility is the feeling you get when you just spent hours cleaning your house, only to have your children destroy it in a matter of minutes. Futility is the feeling you get when you diet for months and reach your target weight, only to put all the pounds back on in a matter of weeks. Futility is the feeling you get after putting in hours of work at a job where you feel that you are making absolutely no difference besides paying your bills. Futility is the feeling that the rest of the AFC East had for the past 20 years, knowing that no matter how hard they tried, the Patriots would win the division. On a more serious note, futility is the feeling you might get watching another African-American man die an unjust death, knowing that, despite all the protests and rallies, George Floyd is far from the first African-American to die an unjust death in this country, and will very likely not be the last.

During this sermon series, I've talked about lamenting death and suffering and our sin, but futility is a special type of angst that we all experience in this world, one that is a major theme in Ecclesiastes. Listen to the first three verses:

*Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 - The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: <sup>2</sup> "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." <sup>3</sup> What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*

If you're unfamiliar with the book of Ecclesiastes, it was written by someone who quotes the teacher, "Qohelet" in Hebrew or "ekkesiastes" in Greek. Although the teacher refers to himself as the son of David, king in Jerusalem, it is most likely not Solomon. More likely, this is a "fictional autobiography," someone taking on the persona of Solomon in order to explore the question of where to find meaning in the world. Solomon was a particularly good persona to adopt because although he was the richest and wisest king, he ultimately turned away from God before he died. And so, Solomon is a great example of a man trying to find meaning and satisfaction in this world, but ultimately being unsuccessful in that search.

If you want to understand Qohelet's point of view, you need to understand an important phrase that is found in verse 3: **under the sun**. Ecclesiastes examines life "under the sun" – life in the secular frame, life in this world, with no thought given to the afterlife or the intervention of God. The author is essentially doing a thought experiment – if this life is all there is, if there is no life after death, then what does that mean, and where do we find meaning? The teacher begins by pursuing wisdom, and then pleasure, and then great accomplishments. He looks at justice and injustice, work, relationships, and many other things. But he keeps coming back to this conclusion: life without God is ultimately meaningless.

Meaningless is a word that occurs 35 times in the book, 4 times in the first 3 verses alone. The Hebrew word translated here as "meaningless" here or "vanity" in the old King James is **Hebel**, which also translates as breath, breeze, or vapor. Everything is transitory, ephemeral and elusive, just beyond our grasp, resistant to our control, here and gone. Everything is ultimately worthless. Life, the teacher says, feels like chasing after the wind, trying to catch something that can not be caught, that is here and gone.

Life under the sun is full of futility and frustration. Maybe you've experience some of the following:

I just want my home clean, but as soon as I clean it, my kids pee on the seat or leave their food out or their socks on the floor, or the dog messes up the furniture. I just want to be all set financially, but something always goes wrong, or there's always car trouble or another bill to be paid

I just want to have a close friend, but I can't find one, or when I find one, they always move away or drift away  
I want to enjoy my life, but I keep experiencing suffering  
I just want to be healthy, but my body won't cooperate.  
I just want to be the husband, the father, or wife, or mother that I know I can be, but I can never seem to get there  
I want the church to be a fulfilling community but I just can't find seem to experience that.  
I just want some peace in this world, but nobody will let me live in peace.  
I want to see justice in this world, but the suffering and injustice I see is out of control and there is no end in sight

It's easier when you're younger to believe that you will find the perfect love, land the satisfying job, live a comfortable life, raise great kids. Everything will be in order, in its right place. But in real life, everything is always just out of reach. Even when you hit the sweet spot, it doesn't stay. Even when you reach a moment of financial stability, or marital bliss, or perfect health, it doesn't last. It is like a vapor, here and then gone again. Trying to keep your hold on it is like chasing after the wind.

Another key word in this passage is found in verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> *What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*

**Gain** – “Yitron”. What do we gain? What is the profit or reward? What is of permanent value left after you've done it all? What have you got to show for it? You're very busy. You're working so hard. When it's all said and done, what will you have to show for it? What difference are you making? What purpose? Are you just here to work hard, suffer, die, and ultimately be forgotten?

Can you hear the lament in these verses? God it all feels meaningless, like I am spinning my wheels and getting nowhere, trying to hold on to something that can not be caught. What am I really gaining from all of this effort?

The teacher continues to give specific examples of how he tried to find meaning in this life:

- 1) **Wisdom.**

*Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 - I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. <sup>15</sup> What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. <sup>16</sup> I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.*

As he pursues wisdom and learning, he comes to see how difficult life is. He remarks that it feels like a heavy burden that God has laid on us. He observes that what is twisted cannot be straightened – there is something fundamentally flawed and unfixable about this world that is contributing to this futility. **And he concludes that the more you know, the more sorrow and grief you feel.**

Some of you may have experienced this reality. After all, there is a reason there is a thing called blissful ignorance. If there is no God, no life after death, then if you truly stop and think about things, it will cause great sorrow. Thomas Nagel, a former philosophy prof from NYU, wrote a book called *What does it all mean: A very short introduction to philosophy*. In the last chapter of the book on the meaning of life, he wrote this:

*"Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, you must remember that eventually the solar system will cool, or the universe will wind down and collapse, and all trace of your effort will vanish. If your life is going to matter, it can only matter from the inside emotionally. From the outside objectively it wouldn't matter whether you had ever existed or not... But why dwell on that? Dwell on the thing that you're living for. Just try to enjoy life and don't think too much about that big picture."*

In other words, it's better to live your life like the old Bobby McFerrin song: "Don't worry, be happy." Living for wisdom if there is no God is only going to lead to despair or to suppressing the truth.

## 2) **Pleasure**

<sup>NIV</sup> *Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 - I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. <sup>2</sup>*

"Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" <sup>3</sup> I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly-- my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. <sup>4</sup> I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. <sup>5</sup> I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. <sup>6</sup> I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. <sup>8</sup> I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well-- the delights of the heart of man. <sup>9</sup> I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. <sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. <sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Next, the teacher goes after pleasure: laughter, wine, folly, projects, slaves, herds and flocks, silver and gold, singers, and a harem. Entertainment, sex, drink, money, and possessions. As he puts it:

<sup>10</sup> I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.

For many people, this sounds great. Most of us can't deny ourselves nothing, but we recognize the lure of living for pleasure, denying ourselves nothing. Many of us think that would bring satisfaction and joy. If I just had the money to travel anywhere I wanted, to have all the sex I want, to buy anything I wanted, to enjoy all the entertainment, dinners, concerts, sporting events, and so on that I wanted, that would be great. If I could just love who I want to love, do what I want to do, and let nothing hold me back, then surely I would be happy, right?

But as he found out, in the end even the pursuit of pleasure is also a chasing after the wind. You can not catch and keep the high that you seek, the ecstasy that you long to live in. Certainly this is most obvious from addictions like drugs and alcohol. It's what is known as tolerance.

From a website on using crystal meth: "The first high is nearly impossible to duplicate. As users try to escape the rebound low and recreate that initial feeling, they take more and more of the drug. Addicted, users keeps taking drugs long after

*it stops giving them pleasure, despite the consequences. It lowers dopamine levels and damages the brain.”*

But this is true for other pursuits as well, like money:

**Ecclesiastes 5:10-12** - *Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless. <sup>11</sup> As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? <sup>12</sup> The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.*

How much money is enough? Just a little more. Is anyone ever satisfied with their income? And the more you have, the more anxiety you have, because the more you have to guard or lose. Wealth does not bring contentment. Fame does not bring happiness. **In fact, if you haven't noticed, the wealthier a society grows, the more common is depression.**

The pursuit of pleasure doesn't satisfy. It's not just the Bible that claims this, but science as well:

*“On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the New York Times Magazine ran an interesting article called ‘Happiness 101.’ It described positive psychology, a branch of psychology that seeks to take a scientific, empirical approach to what makes people happy. Researchers in this field have found that if you focus on doing things and getting things that give you pleasure, it does not lead to happiness but produces what one researcher has dubbed ‘the hedonic treadmill.’ You become addicted to pleasure, and your need for the pleasure fix keeps growing: You have to do more and more. You’re never really satisfied, never really happy.*

Qohelet describes here the futility that comes about by seeing the disappointment of success. It doesn't bring satisfaction. Even the pursuit of pleasure is in the end a futile pursuit.

### 3) **Work & achievement**

Maybe work and achievement will satisfy me and give me purpose. But it too felt like a chasing after the wind, gaining nothing.

***Ecclesiastes 2:11*** - Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Furthermore, he realized how alienating work can be.

***Ecclesiastes 4:7-8*** - Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: <sup>8</sup> There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless-- a miserable business!

How does this happen? For some, it happens because we work hard to provide for our family, and find that we have no time to spend with our family, no one to enjoy our time with. Or we're too tired and can only give our leftovers to the people who matter most. It may happen because our work gains us the admiration and approval of the crowd, but not of the ones who matter most.

And finally, there is no guarantee that anything we do will have lasting meaning.

***Ecclesiastes 2:18-21*** - I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. <sup>19</sup> And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. <sup>20</sup> So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. <sup>21</sup> For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.

After pursuing wisdom, pleasure, and achievement, the teacher is left lamenting how meaningless it all is, how futile life under the sun is.

And what about justice?

***Ecclesiastes 4:1-3*** - Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed-- and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors-- and they have no comforter. <sup>2</sup> And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. <sup>3</sup> But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun

Thousands of years later, there is still so much oppression and injustice. Right now racism is in the news, but even if you set aside racism, there is still so much other injustice around the world – children starving while others throw out expired food. Millions living without clean water or basic sanitation while others never have to worry about it. Children forced into slavery, women treated like property, babies murdered before they even have a chance to live. It would truly overwhelm you if you thought too much about it. And trying to overcome injustice can feel like trying to empty out the ocean with a teaspoon. It all can seem so futile.

So how do we deal with the futility? Try not to think about it too much? Don't worry, be happy? Keep trying harder? Or is there a better way?

The answer is to follow the way of lament. We turn to God. We voice our complaint, pouring out our heart to God. We ask boldly of God for justice, for purpose, for joy, for wisdom. We do not give up looking for those things. But in the end, we do not put our trust in any of those things. We do not put our hope in anything in this world. We choose to trust in God. We choose to look to Him for that which the world can not provide:

C.S. Lewis put it this way in *The Weight of Glory*:

*“The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”*

Why is there so much futility and frustration in this world? Because this world is not your home. You can not find true meaning here. Because you are longing for the world you were created for. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*:

*“If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”*

Or, as the teacher puts it:

***Ecclesiastes 3:11** - He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

It is not wrong to enjoy food, and wine, and travel, and music, and sex. But the answer to the futility of this world is not to look to the pleasures or achievements of this world in order to find our meaning and satisfaction and joy, but to pursue God first and foremost, the only one who can truly satisfy and give life to the fullest.

***Psalms 37:4** - Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

It is not to stop pursuing pleasure, but to recognize that the highest and most satisfying pleasure is found in God, and to pursue Him with your whole heart. Consider these Psalms:

***Psalms 16:11** - You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand*

*“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.”*

### **St. Augustine**

***John 10:10** - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Trade in your pursuit of earthly pleasures that can not satisfy for the one who can: God.

***Isaiah 55:1-3** - "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. <sup>2</sup> Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. <sup>3</sup> Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*

When you have found your joy in the Lord, then you have the proper perspective from which to enjoy learning, and pleasure, and achievement, and to continue to work for love and justice. At the end of a great chapter on the resurrection and its implications, Paul writes these words:

*1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, 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.*

See that last word there? It is not all vanity, not all meaningless. Because of the resurrection, there is a sense in which everything we do for the Lord in this life matters eternally. This is critical to understand when this world feels so futile, when you feel like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill.

*Bruce Milne – “Every kingdom work, whether publicly performed or privately endeavored, partakes of the kingdom’s imperishable character. Every honest intention, every stumbling word of witness, every resistance of temptation, every motion of worship, every struggle towards obedience, every mumbled prayer, everything, literally, which flows out of our faith-relationship with the Ever-Living One, will find its place in the ever-living heavenly order which will dawn at his coming.”*

Somehow your efforts to love God and love others are eternally significant, are never in vain. What do you do with the futility of life? Enjoy the gifts you have from God. Love your spouse. Raise your kids. Work your job. **But put all of it in the proper perspective.** All of these gifts will not fulfill you. They are meant to point you to the giver of the gifts, the one in whom true satisfaction and meaning is found. Your marriage, or desire for it, points to the love relationship you will have forever with Christ. Your work, rewarding or unrewarding is a shadow of the real thing, the real fulfillment, that you will have forever with Christ. Your family, and your church, is a shadow of the perfect heavenly family you will belong to. Your desire for justice points you to the perfect justice we will experience forever when we are with God.

And as for all the futility and frustration you experience? You don’t need to stop working for order, searching for peace, trying to improve yourself. But know that the frustration and futility will not go away this side of heaven. Instead of despairing or letting it drive you crazy, let it point you to Christ. Let it be a reminder that this life was not meant to satisfy you, that this world is not your home, that you were made for another world. The brokenness of this world will be

fixed when Christ returns and sets all things to rights. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because everything that is done to honor Him is eternally significant.