

Life in the Hamster Wheel

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

This morning we start a new sermon series through the book of Ecclesiastes. The title of the book comes from the first verse: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). The word translated “preacher” there is the Hebrew word *qoheleth*, translated into Greek, *ecclesiastes*. It refers to a person “who gathers an assembly to address it [so, a preacher or teacher] or to one who gathers words for instruction.”¹ If you pick up a commentary or a book written to help you understand this book, they’ll often refer to it by this Hebrew title: Qoheleth (with a Q).

So this book is the collected sayings and wisdom of “the Preacher,” Ecclesiastes. We’re not given his name, but he has traditionally been understood to be David’s son, Solomon, who wrote Song of Songs and most of Proverbs. And for obvious reasons: he is called “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” in v. 1, and the life he describes parallels Solomon’s life in 1 Kings—wisdom, wealth, women, and so on.² There are also several reasons that some have questioned whether Solomon is the author. For instance, Solomon is never mentioned by name as author, unlike in Proverbs and Song of Songs. And there are other reasons, too. So it’s suggested that the author is “someone who wanted to present that famous king’s tragic downfall as a cautionary tale”³—so, using Solomon as a foil for deconstructing all that we might look to for satisfaction in life. At the end of the day, though, the message of the book doesn’t rest and isn’t changed based on who wrote it. I’m content to refer to the author as Solomon. But this is God’s Word, for all generations, and it’s particularly relevant for us today living in New England.

I’ve given this sermon series what is possibly the longest series title in preaching history (at least since the Puritans; it takes up two whole banners, and that’s not the whole thing): *Work, Wealth, Pleasure, Knowledge, and Other Dreams that Disappoint: The Surprising Hope of Ecclesiastes*. But that long title is designed to capture the tension that we find in this book, a tension that makes Ecclesiastes so obviously relevant for us in New England today, and more specifically in Greater Boston. Do a random survey on your street, in your school, at your office, in your child’s play group, and ask a simple question: *What do you live for? What do you look to for lasting significance and gain?* Among others, you’re going to hear these answers:

- **Work:** I live for my job, my career. Working my way up the ladder, landing the big dollar client, accomplishing a good day’s work. We live for work. Or . . .

¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 18.

² Compare Eccl. 1–2 with 1 Kgs. 3–11.

³ Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 24 (though Ryken appears to lean toward Solomonic authorship).

- **Wealth:** We trust in our money to answer our problems. We think if we just had a little more, our problems would go away. Our church is located in the wealthiest town in the state. It's really easy to live for wealth. How about . . .
- **Pleasure:** We live for weekends at the Cape, for Red Sox games, Patriots, Celtics, and Bruins. We look for significance in our social life, whether virtual on Facebook, or personally with our night life—clubbing, alcohol, sex. Pleasure. Then there's . . .
- **Knowledge:** Boston boasts the finest institutes in higher education—Harvard, MIT, Tufts, Wellesley, along with prestigious private schools like the Phillips Academy. Some of you in this room have more degrees than Fahrenheit. We live for knowledge.

As a culture, we work hard, we're wealthy, we're smart, and there's always something to do. This is living. And there are other dreams, too: family, power, relationships, religion, and so on.

The problem is that they all disappoint. In one way or another, at some point or another, these dreams will let us down. They are, as Ecclesiastes tells us, vapor, smoke. Corporate empires built from a lifetime of hard work are handed off to the next generation only to crumble in a few years. Stock markets fall and investors falter, and the money we trusted in disappears. Activities that bring one pleasure today seem slightly more dull and less exhilarating tomorrow. We study our whole lives to unravel the mysteries of life, only to face the same event as everyone else: death.

You don't have to be a Christian to know immediately what Ecclesiastes is talking about. When pioneer sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, described his observations of America back in the 1830's, he noted what he called a "strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants . . . in the midst of abundance."⁴ We have all this stuff, all these achievements, so much to do and to see, and yet we're not satisfied. Because in those perhaps rare moments when we're honest enough to let our guard down, we know in our hearts that none of this is secure. The only things that stand between us and losing our dreams are time and chance. And eventually everything succumbs to them. This book resonates with the deep longing and unspoken sadness of our hearts as we wrestle with life's inconsistencies and come to terms with the fleeting and fruitless realities of life under the sun—life in the hamster wheel.

But before you rush off to the pharmacy as you think about coping with 19 weeks in this depressing book of Ecclesiastes, you need to know that Ecclesiastes doesn't leave us there. There is a surprising hope in this relatively dark and pessimistic book. As we're going to see in our passage this morning and throughout the rest of the book, what this book tells us is that *our only hope for lasting gain in a fleeting and fruitless world is God himself*. But unless we wrestle honestly with the hard realities of life's disappointments, we'll never be able to see that hope or appreciate it for what it is. Unless the hollow dreams of this world are exposed for what they are, we'll never see life from God's perspective, and therefore gain the wisdom necessary for living out our days with reverence and joy in the midst of a fallen world. You have to descend the dark, mysterious, even dangerous valley of reality and temporality in order to enjoy the breathtaking, liberating vision of life with God in Jesus waiting on the other side.

⁴ *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York, Harper, 1988), 296. As cited in Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (NY: Dutton, 2009), x.

And so the Preacher invites us on a journey. And with him we shall go for the next several months.

Ecclesiastes is a systematic exploration of all of life “under the sun”—a phrase that occurs 29 times in the book (“all that is done under the sun,” “there is nothing new under the sun,” “I have seen everything that is done under the sun,” etc.). By “under the sun,” Solomon refers to the realm that we live in everyday—what we can see with our own eyes, what we experience here and now, day in and day out on this earth, in this fallen world—a world that has been broken and stained by human sin and rebellion against God, a world given to decay, corruption, and disappointment. This world is Solomon’s laboratory, and in this book he takes a hard, honest look at life here as he examines and evaluates work, wealth, pleasure, knowledge, wisdom, time, eternity, relationships, power, politics, and everything else done “under the sun.” He’s so honest that some have accused him of being unorthodox, of teaching things that don’t line up with the rest of Scripture. One ancient rabbi quipped: “Solomon wrote Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and [Ecclesiastes] in his senility.”⁵ One modern scholar has said “Nowhere else in holy scripture is there so forthrightly set out an alternative vision to that of the gospel, a rival version of truth.”⁶ Where exactly is Solomon taking us?

There is one key question driving his exploration.⁷ We see it in v. 3, and it will come up again and again in various forms: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). In other words, is anything of lasting value, any lasting gain to be found under the sun, in this life as we live out our days in this fallen world, running back and forth from job to home to school back to job? If we just stop for a moment and step back, if we take a closer look at all that we spend our time and energy doing, does any of it truly last or make a difference in the long run? “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” That’s his question. If anything, what is it? And if nothing, well then what?

His preliminary conclusion is rather unsettling. Verse 2: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” And not only is this his preliminary conclusion, it’s the theme of the whole book. The word here translated “vanity” occurs 38 times in this book. It means vapor or breath; other versions translate it “meaningless,” as in the NIV (which in my estimation is a little too specific. It can mean that, but it doesn’t always, which is why I’m preaching this series from the English Standard Version instead).

This is the Preacher’s conclusion: “vapor of vapors—everything is vapor” (1:2). Like trying to grab hold of a puff of smoke or your breath on a cold morning, so everything in this world that we try to take hold of in order to find lasting significance is ultimately fleeting and fruitless. Derek Kidner describes: “A wisp of vapor, a puff of wind, a mere breath—nothing you could get your hands on . . .”⁸ That’s this word—vanity, vapor. There’s no substance, no lasting gain. Life is vapor. It doesn’t last, and it doesn’t amount to much in the end.

⁵ John E. Johnson, “The Special Relevance of Ecclesiastes for Contemporary Culture,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169 (Apr-Jun 2012): 159. Citing James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 54

⁶ Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 283-287. Cited in Bartholomew, 39.

⁷ See Richard L. Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Gary Burge and Andrew Hill, eds. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

⁸ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 22.

Do you know what he's talking about? Can you feel it in the endless cycle of the daily grind? Do you have that sneaking suspicion—what if he's right? That all we give ourselves to in this fallen world, under the sun, is fleeting and fruitless?

In case you need some convincing, Solomon goes on to offer some evidence in vv. 4-11. Think about the fleeting nature of humanity on this world. Verse 4: "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever." Did you ever wonder what Algonquin tribe used to live on the land your house rests on? Someone else used to call that home 300 years ago—we don't know who they were. How about the family that lived in your house before you bought it, or before them? It's as if the earth watches this parade of humanity coming and going, coming and going, with little or no awareness of one another. Vapor.

Think about the endless toil of creation. What does it have to show for all its work? Verse 5: "The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens [or returns panting] to the place where it rises." Always running, never getting anywhere. The sun's work is never any closer to being finished at the end of the day. And as we sleep and awake with its setting and rising, neither is ours.

Consider the wind, v. 6: "The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns." A whole lot of motion and activity with nothing to show for it. Think about the streams, v. 7: "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again." How much work does it take for the mighty Mississippi to move all that water, being fed by the Missouri River and the Ohio River and countless other tributaries over 32 states—how much work is it to move all that water into the ocean, and yet sea level remains the same. That's kind of disappointing. The endless cycle of evaporation and precipitation—a whole lot of work, nothing to show for it.

Think about all the effort we expend speaking, seeing, and hearing, and yet we're never satisfied. Our ears are never full, our eyes are never done, as he says in v. 8: "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."

And of course all of this is meant to illustrate how our work is never complete, and doesn't ultimately accomplish much of anything. There's no lasting gain under the sun. This is life in the hamster wheel—what you and I do everyday: always running, but never getting anywhere. A whole lot of effort without much to show. Douglas Wilson summarizes: "You washed the dishes last night, and there they are again. You changed the oil in your car three months ago, and now you're doing it again. This shirt was clean yesterday."⁹ With little kids in the home, my wonderful wife lives this reality—the endless mountain of laundry. We'll sit down to fold the mountain of clean clothes and watch a show or something, and it feels so good to get it done and put away, and two days later there it is again. It's just downright depressing. And we all feel that in our various fields of work. And don't, by the way, think that ministry is immune from this. You can spend years discipling someone, investing in someone, preaching to a congregation, only to watch some people make deadly decisions with their life. It's not surprising to hear

⁹ Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 18.

Paul's anxiety as he rebukes the church in Galatia in Galatians 4:11: "I am afraid I may have labored over you *in vain*."

As Pastor Doug O'Donnell summarizes, this book "shows us the futility of our work in this world, even our most fruitful work. Like an apple that ripens only to fall to the ground and decay, so our work eventually comes to nothing."¹⁰

And that's what vv. 9-11 pound uncomfortably home. First, our work adds nothing new to the world.¹¹ Verse 9: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." (1:9-10). Now one might argue that there's much new in our world. In fact the world is always changing. In 2006 the iPhone didn't exist; today it accounts for 58% of the income for a 550 billion dollar company.¹² That sounds pretty new. But people still have to show up for work everyday to create something called an iPhone. And other people still manage those people. Some of them still get fired, still get sick. They all still die eventually. Solomon's not saying that there's no such thing as an invention, but that despite human innovation, life is basically the same rat race. And who can disagree with that?

And it gets worse. Not only does our work add nothing new, it won't be remembered either. Verse 11: "There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after." Think about what he's saying: we—you and I—won't be remembered. That sound's a bit bleak, perhaps. But a simple test will suffice. And I want you to actually raise your hand for this: How many of you can name all eight of your great-grandparents? First names? Think about it for a minute—all eight of them. Anyone? Right now, as far as your work and accomplishments are concerned, under the sun, you are a mere four generations from oblivion. O'Donnell puts it quite sharply: "Today's celebrities are tomorrow's obituaries, and their names are as disposable as the morning paper in which their life stories will be printed."¹³

So if all this is true—that whatever we might look to for lasting gain in this fallen world, in what we can see and experience in life under the sun, that everything is vapor—then how do we respond?

Doug O'Donnell suggests there are three common responses among humanity, and I think he's right: We can try to escape, we can just give up, or we can party.¹⁴ If none of this lasts and therefore matters or amounts to anything, we can try to escape that harsh reality simply perhaps by medicating the pain and sorrow through drugs or alcohol or porn, something that gives us a semblance of feeling in control, or we can try to escape by buckling down and trying harder,

¹⁰ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 62.

¹¹ See O'Donnell, 63-69.

¹² Tim Challies, <https://twitter.com/#!/challies>. See also Derek Thompson, "5 Years Ago, iPhones and iPads Didn't Exist, and Now They're 75% of Apple," *The Atlantic* (Jan. 12, 2012). Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/01/5-years-ago-iphones-and-ipads-didnt-exist-and-now-theyre-75-of-apple/251943/>.

¹³ O'Donnell, 67.

¹⁴ O'Donnell, 69-72.

spinning that hamster wheel even faster around and around as we try to make it go somewhere. But it doesn't. In the end it all disappoints.

And so maybe instead we just give up. We get philosophical, we buy into what's called *Nihilism*—the belief that nothing truly matters, and resign ourselves to a meaningless existence. But that's not much fun, so most of us instead decide to party. I can't remember if it was Dave Matthews Band or Isaiah that said, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (cf. Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). Or the recent beer commercial where the astronomer sees an oncoming meteor that's going to destroy the earth so the whole lab starts partying. If nothing matters, if it's all going to burn anyway, let's at least enjoy some marshmallows and s'mores in the process.

But is that all? Are those the only possible responses to the dissatisfaction we find in life under the sun? Is there any hope in this book? The short answer: yes. Because there is God. In fact, it's arguable that no other book in Scripture invites us to know and enjoy God more deeply and with greater satisfaction than Ecclesiastes. But, as Pastor and now college President Phil Ryken says, "in order to know and enjoy God properly, we first have to see the emptiness of life without him, becoming thoroughly disillusioned with everything the world has to offer."¹⁵

The God portrayed in this book is not a God who has momentarily slipped off his throne and consequently life on earth has spun out of control. Nor is he sitting in heaven wringing his hands trying to figure out what to do about the mess sin has made.

- This God is *sovereign*: "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (Eccl. 7:13).
- This God is *powerful*: "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it" (3:14).
- This God is *good*: "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil— *this is God's gift to man*" (3:12-13).
- And this God *cares about everything* that happens and everything that we do: "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work" (3:17).

When we look at this world through our eyes, our experience, what we can see and evaluate from the ground, it does look pretty meaningless, like nothing matters. But when we see the world through God's eyes, from "above the sun," we see that in fact *everything* matters. "For God will bring *every* deed into judgment, with *every* secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:14).¹⁶ And only then, when we view life from *above the sun*, from God's perspective, will we have the wisdom necessary for living out our days with reverence before God and joy in what he's given us to do, even when the work of our hands doesn't last.

Because the God of the universe is not only sovereign over the confusion and vanity of life, but he sent his eternal Son into this world to take the vanity on himself, all the corruption, all the sin, all the decay and meaninglessness of life, on himself on the cross. Our work may add nothing new; Jesus did a *completely new work* on the cross—a work of redemption. Our work won't be

¹⁵ Ryken, 21.

¹⁶ Kidner, 20.

remembered; Jesus' work is remembered, because it changed the course of human history.¹⁷ And get this, not only is Jesus' work remembered, but Jesus *remembers us*. Jesus *sees us*. By his blood, every evil deed is cleansed and forgiven for those who personally place their faith in him. By his Spirit, none of our service to him is wasted. All the work we do in this world that is so quickly forgotten or falls apart, none of it is wasted if it's done *for* him, "as to the Lord" (Eph. 6:7; Col. 3:23-24).

When folding socks is done in love for someone and with a thankful heart to God who's given us today, it's act of service to him, an act of worship. When paying bills, or teaching kids, or selling software, or fixing cars is done in love for another, with a holiness that reflects God's character, and with thankfulness to him, it's an act of worship. It will be remembered by God. When we bear witness to how beautiful and worthy God is, not just with our works, but with our words as we point others to Christ, we may never see the results, but our work is not wasted. Because the God we serve not only gave his Son to rescue and cleanse us from our sinful works, but he raised Jesus from the dead to bring new life, new hope, new creation to a decaying and futile world (Rom. 8:20). Listen to what Paul says about our service to God in 1 Corinthians 15:58: "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*." Did you catch that? It's not in vain.

There is meaning, there is significance, everything does matter, because there is God. Whether you know this God personally, or whether you're simply exploring the things of faith, I invite to come along on this journey, come with us, with Ecclesiastes, down into the dark, mysterious valley, take a hard, honest look at reality, the vapor of life and all the dreams that disappoint, and then come with us up the other side to see Jesus and the beauty and significance and lasting gain of knowing him and living life in joyful and reverent submission to God.

Our only hope for lasting gain in a fleeting and fruitless world is God himself.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your initial reaction when you heard we were going to be spending 19 weeks in the book of Ecclesiastes? What ideas did you have about this book before we started?
2. The question driving Solomon's exploration of life is v. 3: "What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" Do you ever find yourself echoing that question? If so, what tends to trigger it?
3. What from your own life experience can you add to Solomon's list of evidence (vv. 4-11) about the fleeting and fruitless experience of our daily work?
4. How might Ecclesiastes resonate with and minister to friends and neighbors who don't know Christ?
5. With such a raw and at times pessimistic outlook on life, what is it that keeps this book orthodox (i.e. consistent with the rest of Scripture)?

¹⁷ O'Donnell, 72-73.