

Today we're beginning a new sermon series on the book of Ecclesiastes. If you're familiar with this book, you'll appreciate the irony of that remark. If you're not familiar with this book, you won't get it until you read 1:9. I'll wait. Ah, yes – Ecclesiastes jokes. Few and far between!

Ecclesiastes is one of the most difficult books in the Bible to understand—and, when you do understand a verse or two, to enjoy. There are a few coffee mug verses in this book, but not very many! As a result, it's one of the least read and least preached. So why are we going thru it?

1. Conviction. We believe the whole Bible is the word of God. Further, we believe God knows better than we do what we need to hear. Therefore, it's simply a matter of conviction, arising from these basic beliefs, that at some point we are going to have to preach through Ecclesiastes.
2. Joy. Ecclesiastes addresses one of the most basic desires of the human heart: the joy of an abundant, meaningful life. Many paths promise to lead us there. In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher (v1) explores them all and assures us that only one leads where we want to go.
3. Evangelism. This book describes Douglas County better than any other in the Bible. The Preacher looked for abundant life down all the same paths as the wealthy, accomplished overachievers around us—money, work, pleasure, relationships, legacy, power, religion. His conclusion? “Vanity of vanities,” which is where our friends and neighbors will find themselves very soon. This book can deepen our compassion, heighten our insight, and broaden our comprehension of the gospel—all of which will make us better evangelists to people just like this Preacher... and just like us.
4. Worship. Jesus fulfills what this book describes. We'll see exactly how in full detail week by week as we go through it. For now, know that even this obscure book prepares for and predicts the life and ministry of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Moments ago, I admitted this is a difficult book to understand. Yet there are several key words and phrases which, if you understand them and recognize their importance, help unlock much of the meaning of this book. I've included what I think are the 5 keys on the bookmarks, most

of which will come up (or be intentionally brought up) in today's text.

The Author

v1 *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

“The Preacher.” It's a difficult word to bring across from Hebrew into English, so some scholars don't even try—they just use the Hebrew word, which is “Qohelet.” It's not a name. It's a title, and it's connected with the Hebrew verb for assembling or gathering, perhaps a collector of sayings or a gatherer of people. That notion of assembly is behind the title we use for the book—“Ecclesiastes” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Qohelet.” You can hear the connection to “ecclesiastical,” which of course is our English word for things pertaining to the church, i.e., the gathered people of God. The many attempts at translating it into English have included Speaker, President, Spokesman, Philosopher, Professor, Collector—the ESV uses “the Preacher,” so we will, too.

“The words of the Preacher.” The Preacher is the central figure in the book, but he doesn't appear to be the author. The Preacher doesn't begin speaking until v12; and when he does, it's always in first person:

v12 *I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.*

This first person perspective runs through most of the rest of the book (except 7:27) until the very end, where the narrator sums things up again and the perspective changes to 3rd person. So the Preacher's first person account is set between these two bookends, introducing, summarizing *and evaluating* the Preacher's message.

Why do I point this out? It's intriguing, but there's one critical point that emerges from the narrative framework which controls how we interpret this entire book:

12:9-10 Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. ¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The narrator trusts the Preacher! And he encourages us to as well. This is why our awareness of the narrator is so important. The Preacher has gone on an extensive journey to discover the meaning of life, and along the way he makes some puzzling statements to say the least! But it's

this other person, this narrator who speaks in third person, who recounts the Preacher's experiences for the readers and helps us *interpret* and *evaluate* his conclusions. If we had only the first-person words of the Preacher, with no inspired evaluation of his words, we might think this whole book is satire or plain apostasy. But the inspired narrator sums up the Preacher's argument (1:1-11) and then tells us he was right (12:7-14).

"son of David, king in Jerusalem." The narrator *almost* calls the Preacher "Solomon" but not quite, and that claim is never made anywhere in the book. But he does call him "son of David, king in Jerusalem"—a clear claim to be the king of Israel, and another hint that we should trust this man's conclusions. As king in Jerusalem, one of his responsibilities would have been to be familiar with God's ways and lead the people to follow them. And as we just saw from 12:9-10, that's exactly what this Preacher/King did. We can trust him, even though he might sometimes say confusing or aggravating things! Like what? Well, like...

The Theme

v2 *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

This verse reappears in 12:8—bookends for the material in between. It's the narrator's summary of the Preacher's quest for meaning.

It's a shocking, almost breathtaking statement, especially following verse 1. "What? No Bible preacher should say this! No king of Israel would teach the people this!" And that's exactly the point. This shocking statement doesn't close the debate; it opens it! It's an implicit invitation into the Preacher's struggle. It makes us wonder: "What could be so perplexing and so discouraging in this man's journey that he would say this?"

The word "vanity" itself could be translated "absurdity, meaningless, useless, futility, emptiness." It's a word used 38x in the book, often when the Preacher sums up his latest quest for meaning:

2:1 *I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity.*

2:15 *Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me*

also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.

How we understand this word will depend largely on how we read the rest of the book. ***Is the book (and the Preacher) primarily negative, or is it actually positive?*** Yes, the Preacher does say "All is vanity," but there are also quite a few positive passages, what some scholars call "the *carpe diem*" passages:

2:24-26 *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

3:11-13 *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil - this is God's gift to man.*

3:22 *So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?*

5:18-20 *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil - this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

8:15 *And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.*

9:7-9 *Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.*

11:7-12:1 *Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. ⁸ So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.*

⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

¹⁰ Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. ^{12:1} Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth...

How can the Preacher say all these wonderful things about life and still conclude “All is vanity”? This, friends, is the central question of this book: how to resolve the tension between the “Vanity” sections and the *carpe diem* sections.

This isn't just a theological question! It's a massively important personal and existential one! **How do we resolve the tension between the vanity we feel as humans living in a fallen world and the truth we believe has come from God?** We live between these two poles: our daily experience, which often feels meaningless, empty, and confusing; and our Christian conviction, which tells us God is good, life has meaning, and His blessings are enjoyable. How can we bring those two inner realities together?! THAT is what the Preacher wants to talk to us about.

I believe Ecclesiastes is a positive book with a deeply life-affirming, joy-commending message. ...which impacts then how we understand this word “vanity.” I want you to take a closer look at how the Preacher uses that word—particularly how often he couples it with a certain metaphor:

1:14 *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

2:11 *Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*

2:17 *So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

4:4 *Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

(also 2:26, 4:16, 6:9; cf. 1:17, 4:6, 5:16)

The “vanity” he's talking about it like “striving after the wind.” That can't mean utter emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness. After all, the wind is real; it just can't be caught. It's elusive. So when the Preacher cries “Vanity of vanities,” he's not saying there's nothing there, no meaning, no substance to life. He's saying it's hidden, ungraspable, elusive. It's like “chasing the wind.” Kansas sang “All we

are is dust in the wind.” The Preacher is saying something different, something much more hopeful and certainly more truthful in a world governed by a good God.

What is this puzzle that has him so perplexed? What's the enigma which to him is like chasing the wind?

The Question

v3 *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

“What does man gain from all his toil?” This is the Preacher's problem. What's the point of this? Where's the benefit? This is the issue which launches the Preacher on his quest—what gain is there in my life? Ever stop to ask those kinds of questions? Why am I doing this?

Notice the word “man” = humanity, all people. This is a fundamental question, one we're all asking. The Preacher is on a universal quest that engages all of us. He embodies our own thoughts. He's really only different from us in the degree to which he's willing to take his experiences and, thus, his conclusions. He goes one or two steps further than most of us would like to. Where we might say “Well that relationship stunk” and try again, the Preacher says “Might as well quit trying because all relationships stink.” But the point is, he's asking the same questions as you! So let's follow him to his answer!

There's a massively important phrase at the end of verse 3 that we have to understand to grasp the message of this book. It's those three words “under the sun,” which appear 28x in the book. It means exactly what you'd think—life as we see it down here, on earth, below the sky, as if there actually were no God. John Lennon sang:

Imagine there's no heaven

It's easy if you try

No hell below us

Above us only sky

Imagine all the people living for today

It's not a new idea, John. It's exactly what the Preacher did in Ecclesiastes, and his phrase for is was “under the sun.” It is life without regard for God or the revelation He has provided. Life “under the sun” is

the worldview of a **secularist**—the person who operates in a world limited to what we can observe with our senses.

There is another way to approach life, a Christian approach—namely, keeping a clear grasp on who God is and what He has said. It's ultimately the view the Preacher recommends:

12:13-14 *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*

In the Bible, true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord. Ecclesiastes upholds that view, but the Preacher doesn't clearly establish it until the very end. Why? Because **he's deconstructing secularism from the inside**. He wants to see how far he can get in life without the fear of the Lord as his basis. He adopts the worldview of a person who operates without God or any of God's revelation, a person whose knowledge is limited only to what we can observe with our senses.

When this is the boundary of your knowledge, all that's left is "Vanity of vanities." Yes, there is rich meaning and purpose in life, but we cannot find it apart from God. **In a world that came into being by the word of God, we will never find meaning apart from the word of God.** The vanity the Preacher exposes is the utter emptiness of trying to find abundant life through human autonomy in a world that depends at every point upon its Creator. When all our thinking is shaped by the knowledge that God is Creator and King and Judge, only then we can enjoy His good gifts amid the enigma of His purposes and plans.

Why is there no meaning in our lives? To put it back in the words of verse 3, why no gain by all our toil? Verses 4-11 describe the problem...

The Problem(s)

Two problems with life under the sun:

- repetitiveness (vv4-10)
- forgetfulness (v11)

Repetitiveness:

vv4-7 *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 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. ⁷ All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.*

The natural world is an endless cycle of making and unmaking, ceaseless – and thus pointless – activity:

- v4 human families
- v5 sunrise and sunset
- v6 the motions of the wind
- v7 the flowing of water

The earth outlasts us, but its constant cycles of activity show it is as restless as we are. Nothing is moving forward. All journeys end right where they began. What's the point?! It's all an unutterable weariness!

v8 *All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.*

These cycles in the natural world hold up a mirror to our own condition. Our eyes see but are never satisfied. Our ears hear but are never filled. We are just like the oceans—constantly taking in more and more but never filled.

vv9-10 Even human history never really introduces anything new:

vv9-10 *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. ¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.*

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Sure, every generation enjoys its new inventions, new technology, new information. But how have we done at solving any of the massive problems facing humanity: poverty, war, racism, injustice? Or within: depression, identity, loneliness, hope?

Worse, once we're gone, we're forgotten:

v11 *There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.*

Don't pin your hopes on your posterity as a lasting legacy to your life. They'll won't even remember who you are.

This is life "under the sun." From a perspective limited to this world,

there's nothing to indicate otherwise.

ILLUS: *Psychology Today* article "Living a Meaningful Life." One of the comments at the end: "Can our lives have meaning in an inherently meaningless universe? No. Of course not. The search for meaning in our lives is the desire to acquire a comforting illusion. And, believing an illusion is real or true creates a delusion devoid of reason, evidence and experience. [He goes on to blame religion for the delusion, and then concludes:] Once we abandon the search for life's meaning, we can finally enjoy our few years of existence on this planet with all it's joys and sorrows intertwined."

Sheer existentialism. "Stop searching for a bigger picture and just enjoy your life."

But the Preacher says, "Impossible!"

3:11 *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

God made you for something more, something meaningful. And deep down inside everybody knows it!

So what can we do with this endless cycle of meaningless repetition? Actually, the gospel tells us a much different story. No, history is not an endless cycle, doomed to repeat itself over and over. Something new has happened. Something meaningful. Something supernatural, from above the sun.

Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world, disrupting the all the cycles of human life and death. The Preacher argues that since nothing is new, then nothing is gained. But when Jesus enters the world, that was a radically new event! He offers a new birth, gives a new commandment, establishes a new covenant, promises new life, invites us into an entirely new age, capped off by a new heaven and new earth. All offered us freely through his sinless life and atoning death. And if you'll embrace all that in faith, believing in something clearly NOT from under the sun, you will become a new creature.

The Preacher asks: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Life is an endless cycle, and then you die and are forgotten."

The gospel responds:

1 Corinthians 15:55-58 *O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"* ⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* 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.*

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