

Life under the Sun
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
Halifax: 20 October 2013

Introduction:

I am excited to begin our new sermon series in Ecclesiastes today!

- Can I say that when we are studying a book that tells us that there is nothing new under the sun?
- We shall see...

In a way, I actually began our new series *last week* by introducing and expounding our Psalm of Focus...

- Psalm 90—the Psalm we plan to sing each week as we begin our new series...
- This Psalm was written Moses when Israel was in the wilderness of futility when they might rather have been in the Promised Land of fruitfulness.
 - When God called them to go and take the land, promising to go with them, they refused, saying that it was too hard...
 - and the Lord then sentenced that generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years and die there so that the next generation could go in.
 - For us, *the wilderness* is the fruitless life you live when you live without reference to God...
 - And the Promised Land is the place where we dwell with God in Christ, and are filled with the Holy Spirit so that we bear much fruit.
 - The Promised Land leads to eternal life and is, in fact, the beginning of eternal life because once we are joined to Christ, we cannot die.
 - It is the stage of eternal life that we live out in this fallen world.

Ecclesiastes is about the folly of life in the wilderness—

- It is a warning not to remain there, but to go to the Promised Land!
- It shows us the emptiness of life in the wilderness when we might have lived a fruitful life for God instead.
 - It calls the wilderness by a different name—life under the sun—but it amounts to the very same thing.
 - When it was written, Israel was physically in the Promised Land, but many of them were not living before the face of God and so were in the wilderness.
- I want to warn you from the outset that there are two very different responses to this book of Ecclesiastes—
 - It seems to divide people into two distinct groups with no middle ground.
 - On the one side, you have those who think Ecclesiastes makes no sense.
 - They find it to have little to say and to be depressing and discouraging.
 - Gerhard Von Rad, the famous Old Testament scholar, said that the author was a bitter skeptic suspended over the abyss of despair!

- On the other side, you have those who are think Ecclesiastes is brilliant—very illuminating, uplifting, and full of hope!
- It seems to be the case that you either “get” what this book is saying, or you completely miss the point.
 - It is a book that those who are without spiritual discernment—even and especially those who are wise according to this world—cannot grasp.
 - They cannot see the kingdom that is above the sun because they do not know the God who made (and so is above) the sun.
 - They are groping around here below and they can’t see beyond that, so a book that exposes that and that doesn’t show them how to get on in the only reality they know is quite unhelpful and annoying.
- If you are caught within the confines of life in the wilderness—of life under the sun—and cannot see beyond to God above,
 - you will find this book to be of little value.
 - But if that is that case with you, don’t be tempted to pretend that it is not so in an Emperor’s-new-clothes kind of way.
 - If you acknowledge that you don’t get what this is saying, admit it and ask God to open your eyes!
 - Perhaps He will use it to lead you to the Promised Land!
 - If you truly do know God and are living for Him in Christ, you will find that this book will speak to you with beautiful clarity...
 - to encourage you not to waste your life, but to live the new life that Christ has given you to the fullest.

So let’s get started!

- I will begin with a reading of the first 11 verses...Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

Ecc 1:1-11: The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.” ³ What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?

⁴ *One* generation passes away, and *another* generation comes; but the earth abides forever. ⁵ The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. ⁶ The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. ⁷ All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea *is* not full; to the place

from which the rivers come, there they return again. ⁸ All things *are* full of labor; man cannot express *it*. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ That which has been *is* what will be, that which *is* done is what will be done, and *there is* nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰ Is there anything of which it may be said, “See, this *is* new”? It has already been in ancient times before us. ¹¹ *There is* no remembrance of former *things*, nor will there be any remembrance of *things* that are to come by *those* who will come after.”

May God bless to us the hearing of His holy Word.

I. In the first verse we meet the author—*Qoheleth*!

A. *Qoheleth* in Hebrew, *The Preacher* in the New King James, and *Ecclesiastes* in the Greek, from which we get the name of the book.

1. This word refers to *one who addresses the assembly*.
 - a. Many of you will be able to see that in the Greek word because you will be familiar with the word *ecclesia* which means *assembly of called out ones* and is commonly translated *church* in the Greek New Testament.
 - We get a lot of English words from this—
 - such as Ecclesiology which is the study of the doctrine of the church...
 - And an ecclesiastical commission is a church commission.
 - An Ecclesiastic is a person who serves in the church.
 - Now the *Ecclesiastes* is the one who calls together the *ecclesia* and addresses it—a preacher.
 - b. The Hebrew is very similar...
 - *Qoheleth* comes from the Hebrew word *Qohal*, which refers to the assembly or the congregation of God's people...
 - And *Qoheleth* refers to the one who addresses the assembly—or the one who calls them together.
 - That is why the New King James translates it *the preacher*.
2. Judging from the context, *Qoheleth* appears to be the one who addresses the assembly, in this case, as a penitent who is being restored to fellowship!
 - He appears to be one who had departed from the way of the Lord and had lived for a time in the wilderness...
 - but who has come to his senses and returned to the Lord.
 - In the book, he describes himself as one who tried everything that this world has to offer and found it to be worthless...
 - He is brutally honest about what he found.
 - He can afford to be because he has returned to the Lord, the shepherd and bishop of his soul...
 - He is not forced, as so many are, to try to look at the bright side of life under the sun...
 - He does not have to pretend because he has an alternative...
 - He has an excellent alternative—life with God instead of life under the sun—(instead of life that is practically speaking without God)!
 - He is repenting and because he has found the blessed way,
 - He is earnest to tell the congregation how foolish he has been and what he has learned from his folly...
 - so that, if God is pleased, his hearers will not make the same mistakes that he has made and fall under the same delusions.
 - He is very earnest about pressing the message home to them to warn them lest they waste their lives in the wilderness as he has done.

- Charles Bridges says he wants to replace his bad example with sound teaching:
 - He has drunk deeply of the bitter wormwood of the earthly streams, and is able to point us to the heavenly fountain with its surpassing glory and delights.
- 3. Brothers and sisters, you will do well to listen to this preacher.
 - He has words that are especially pertinent to our society.
 - He puts himself in the shoes of the ordinary person in our society,
 - the person who lives without paying much attention to God,
 - and he shows us where that path leads.
- B. Qoheleth is very well qualified to preach about this matter!
 - God, in His wise providence,
 - has furnished him with exactly what he needs to understand life under the sun and all that it has to offer.
 - 1. Consider his unique situation in life that enabled him to experience the world more fully than anyone else.
 - a. First, that he was the son of Israel's most illustrious king—David.
 - David, the man after God's own heart who led Israel to live for God.
 - b. Secondly, that he himself was made king, and that at time when the kingdom had been brought to its highest level of prosperity in every way.
 - Under his father David, the twelve tribes were fully united...
 - By God's grace, Israel's enemies had all been subdued...
 - Unprecedented wealth had been given to Israel and it was the time for the temple to be built at Jerusalem—
 - something David had not been able to do because he was a man of war...
 - On account of this prosperous time of unparalleled peace, the son of David was given the name Solomon.
 - He does not mention that name here but goes by Qoheleth, likely because in his sin, he felt that he had forfeited that name...
 - The Lord had raised up enemies (Hadad the Edomite and Rezon the son of Eliadah) because of what he had done.
 - But when he started out he was Solomon—he had no active enemies—he was a man of peace and plenty.

TRANS> But there was also something else that God furnished him with to equip him to be our teacher about the folly of the world...

- c. The LORD endowed Solomon with unprecedented wisdom.
 - We are told in Kings that when Solomon was first brought to the throne, he requested wisdom above all things...
 - 1 Kings 4:29-30 tells us how God responded to this request:

- **1 Kings 4:29-30: And God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding, and largeness of heart like the sand on the seashore. Thus Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt.**
 - People from all around came to hear his wisdom.
2. When you put all this together—his position, his prosperity, and his wisdom,
- You have a man who pretty much has unlimited resources to do whatever he wants—to drink everything that this world has to offer and to experience the things that most people only dream about.
 - He had the intelligence to pursue many interests, and he tells us in chapter 2 that “Whatever my eyes desired, I did not withhold from them...”
 - He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines...
 - He had the best wine and food from all over the world...
 - He had exotic animals—monkeys and birds...
 - He had gardens and multiple houses that were richly furnished, that he had designed himself.
 - He had servants that he managed with a skill that brought admiration from all who saw them.
 - He had gold and ivory in great abundance—six hundred and sixty six talents per year in fact worth—about 320 million.
 - He had musicians and artists and servants,
 - He excelled in learning and understanding...
 - He had his fill of all that the world has to offer under the sun.

TRANS> Now what do you think it would be like to have everything you ever wanted—all that you desire...

- and with all that, authority and wealth, to have a brilliant mind to understand things with ease, and design things the way you wanted them to be?
 - What would it be like?
 - Wouldn’t it be wonderful?
 - But now let us look at the conclusion that the man who had everything a man could want came to!

II. The man who had everything under the sun concluded that it was all vanity.

- Look at verse 2...
 - **Ecc 2:2: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”**
- A. What does that mean?
1. Vanity means *empty, worthless, useless, futile!*
 - a. The word *vanity* itself refers to a wisp of vapour—
 - It is like the breath of steam that we start to see at this time of year when we go outdoors!
 - not anything very substantial!
 - Derrick Kidner says it is nothing you can get your hands on—the nearest thing to zero!

- b. Now wait a minute—you mean all those beautiful houses, all of that learning, that huge and well-ordered household, all those women...
 - a wisp of vapour???
 - Is that what you would expect the man who had it all to say?
 - c. There can be no mistaking of Solomon's meaning here!
 - Not only does he use the word *vanity* to describe it all,
 - but he doubles the word for emphasis, and then re-doubles it again: *vanity of vanities*, says the preacher, *vanity of vanities*.
 - And then he declares that all of it is vanity—*all is vanity*...
 - Each and every bit of it and all of it together is a vanishing breath!
2. How could the man who had everything say such a thing?
- You see all the lesser men who are trying to rise in the world with their little chests swelled out and their proud carriage as one who is making it in the world...
 - But Solomon is brutally honest about it all.
 - He is past the point of putting on airs and of trying to prove himself.
 - He has drunk to the full—he has fulfilled all of his dreams—he has had the thousand virgins—and the houses and the lands...
 - and he has concluded that all is vanity without active communion with the living God!
3. Understand, of course, that he is talking about life under the sun.
- He is talking about life without reference to God.
 - The Bible does not teach that wine and houses and sex are bad—
 - All of the things that Solomon had are gifts of God if they are rightly used and they are good things...
 - They are good as long as you don't try to enjoy them and possess them apart from God.
 - When you do that, all is vanity...
 - If you are not living for Him, it is all a big waste...
 - but more about that in moment...first, let's...
- B. Look at how Solomon backs up his conclusion that all is vanity.
- Most people revolt against Solomon's conclusion...
 - So he makes it quite simple and clear...
1. He forces us to evaluate what we gain by all that we do...
- a. He puts it in the form of direct question in verse 3...
 - **Ecc 1:3: What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun?**
 - That is a very simple and reasonable way to look at it...

- If you work all day, you measure as to whether you wasted your time by looking at what you got accomplished.
 - If you were to spend the whole year digging for gold and you worked very hard but found absolutely nothing...
 - you would conclude that you had laboured in vain—it was all vanity—and of course you would be correct.
- b. And Solomon looks at the whole of a person’s life under the sun, and he says, “What profit do you have? What do you have to show for it?”
- And of course there answer is nothing—and that for one simple reason.
 - DEATH!
 - You are going to pass on from the world and what will you have gained for all your labour?
 - He brings this out in verse 4...where he says:
 - **Ecc 1:4: One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.**
- c. Even the earth itself is full of endless repetition—like the generations of men...
- Solomon gives us three illustrations of this endless cycle of existence that never amounts to anything...
 - There is the sun...
 - **5 The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose.**
 - The earth goes on, but the generations keep on disappearing never to return.
 - Men act like their lives under the sun are important, but they never accomplish anything permanent that they can keep.
 - In the same way, there is the wind...
 - **6 The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit.**
 - Like man, it blows and blows to no purpose...
 - But unlike men, the wind keeps on going after many generations of us have passed off the scene.
 - And there are the rivers...
 - **7 All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again.**
 - Like man, they keep on going but never make progress...the ocean never gets full and the river never stops.
 - Unlike the man, the rivers never wear out...
 - In the musical *Show Boat*, Joe, a weary dockworker on the Mississippi River sings these words...

- Ah gits weary,
An' sick o'tryin',
Ah'm tired o' livin',
And skeered o' dyin',
But Ol' Man River,
He jus' keeps rollin' along!

2. Solomon presents two insurmountable problems with the delusion that what you do under the sun (apart from God) amounts to anything...

- a. First of all, that nothing ever really satisfies man in life under the sun...
 - This he expresses in verse 8:
 - **Ecc 1:8: All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.**
 - We can watch one clip after another on YouTube, but we always want more—we are never completed—never full...
 - We can listen to one i-tune after another, but again, our ears still crave more or crave it again.
 - Oh yes, we may gain momentary satisfaction, but it does not last...
 - And eventually we grow old and what used to satisfy us does not satisfy us anymore and then we die with nothing.
 - What did it all amount to?
 - What was the profit of your whole life?
 - It is here, and it is gone, and you die empty and incomplete.
 - Just think of the young woman who starts to make it big as a pop singer...
 - She is so excited because she actually believes she will be filled.
 - She starts to sign contracts, she is loved by her fans, the money starts to roll in, she is asked to be on various shows...
 - She is really *making* it now...but she is still not satisfied—
 - Despite all her fame and all her wealth, she is still the same as she ever was—only worse...
 - because now she has been disappointed...
 - She turns to bizarre behaviour, she turns to drugs, and soon she is having addiction therapy...
 - Still she is not satisfied and then she grows old and loses her voice and her appearance and she dies.
 - What did she profit from it all?
 - It was all vanity.
 - b. The second problem is that there is nothing new...
 - Solomon expresses this in verses 9-11 where he says:

- **Ecc 1:9-11: That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.** ¹⁰ Is there anything of which it may be said, “See, this is new”? It has already been in ancient times before us. ¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.
 - The point here is that nothing is accomplished...no contribution is made...
 - nothing whatsoever is added to you for all your labour under the sun—nothing that is not taken away by death.
 - That is the raw facts,
 - and there is nothing new that is going to come along and made any change to these stubborn facts.
 - Yes, we have advances—we have wireless technology—we have computers...
 - but so what?
 - Death will separate you from it all and you will be left with nothing.
 - Do not think that anything under the sun will ever change that.
 - For every generation, death comes and takes everything away!
 - It is like that song about the Red River Flood in Manitoba by Murray Mclauchlan...
 - **You can put your whole life in this piece of clay and the Red River comes and takes it all away.**
 - Is that not precisely what death does to every generation?
 - You toil and labour your whole life and then you are gone!
 - You have nothing at all to show for it!
 - You say, well yes, but I leave my children behind...
 - But what good is that?
 - They are going to be swept away too...just like you...
 - And after a few generations, nobody will even remember you!
 - That is the brutal truth—how many of you have any significant remembrance of your great great grandfather?
3. The facts are just too obvious to deny—vanity of vanity, all is vanity!
- It is just that we want to deny them...
 - But the truth remains...*there is no profit under the sun!*
 - Death has come and it is the intruder.
 - It was never part of the original picture, but was introduced when we fell...
 - And no matter what we do under the sun—no matter how great our achievements, death ensures that it all amounts to nothing!

- Nobody wants to face this...
 - This poem by Stephen Crane illustrates our attitude toward these stubborn facts. He says:
 - **I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.**
 - I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
“It is futile,” I said,
“You can never—”**
 - “You lie,” he cried,
And ran on.**
- Such is the way of the average man in the world today...
 - He is toiling for what he can never have—what will never satisfy.
 - And even when Solomon comes and meets him with the truth, he only denies it and runs on.
 - What Solomon says is awful, but absolutely true.

III. But why does Solomon tell us all of this?

- Everybody is trying to put a positive face on life and make the best of it and this kill joy comes along and starts talking about how worthless it all is.
 - Why all the gloom?
- A. Solomon tells us this because he has a solution for the problem.
 1. Solomon has a solution to replace a life of vanity with a life of true fruitfulness.
 - He is telling you the truth so that you won't waste your whole life on vanity.
 - He wants to force the inescapable truth on you about life under the sun so that you will have to face it...
 - in hopes that you will do something about it!
 - It is a mission of mercy...
 - He had poured his life in vanity and when he sees others doing it, he wants to warn them what it all amounts to!
 - My friends, God has put Ecclesiastes in the Bible to wake you up from your delusions that you can accomplish anything under the sun—just doing stuff—when there is another way!

TRANS> And Solomon knows a better way! He has a better way that he is going to lead us to!

2. I am going to cheat and look at the end of the book—
 - a. You know how some people do when they get a book—instead of starting on the first page and letting the story unfold,
 - they turn to end to look at the conclusion!

- Well I am going to do that with Ecclesiastes because we are going to go through it a bit at a time...
 - And as we do, we need to see where Solomon is going or we will most certainly despair!
- b. In chapter 12 verse 13 and 14, he says:
- **Ecc 12:13-14: Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. ¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.**
- 1) This is what Solomon is leading us to do...
 - To move away from life under the sun—
 - that pays no attention to the God who rules above the sun...
 - to a life that fully acknowledges Him!
 - 2) Fearing God means that you live before His face—in the consciousness of Him—
 - not ignoring Him as we so often do, but giving Him that place that is His in your life as the Creator and Lord of all.
 - You are to worship Him and praise Him!
 - You are to give thanks to Him for all that He has done!
 - And you are to keep His commandments—that is, to live for Him, doing what is pleasing before Him.
 - 3) You see, your life is worthless and meaningless without Him because you were made for Him.
 - Living without Him is like being a car without driver...
 - or like being a dental receptionist without a dentist...
 - She sits around making appointments and filling out forms, but there is no dentist—she just does it to do it—it's vanity.
 - And whether you admit it or not, there is a dentist—
 - God is there and you are ignoring Him...
 - And you need to know that He is going to judge all that you have done—as Solomon says...
 - Every work will be brought to judgement including every secret thing, whether good or evil.
 - So if you are not living to please Him, not only are you accomplishing nothing under the sun,
 - but you are also storing up wrath for the day of judgement!
 - The final message is not that nothing matters,
 - but that everything matters—and matters very much!
 - God is going to judge everything you do!

TRANS> So you must come to live before God...

- Stop living under the sun and start living before the One who made the sun!
- But there is something huge that still remains...
 - We have seen what you are to do, but how are you to go about doing it?

B. How can you escape vanity and live before the face of God?

1. You come to God through Jesus...

- Jesus told us when He came that the Father had sent Him and that He is the way,
 - the truth and the life, and that no one can come to the Father but through Him.
- Jesus was the way in the Old Testament too...
 - He was revealed to them in their promises and in their ceremonies and sacrifices...
 - But now for us, in these last days (which began when He came to earth), we have Jesus revealed as crucified for us...
 - And we are commanded to leave a life of futility under the sun and to come trusting in Him that we might live for God.

2. Once you are joined to Jesus, He gives you life—eternal life—

- Eternal life is life with God—life connected to God.
 - It is life outside of the vain and endless repetition that amounts to nothing!
 - Now you are going somewhere!
- As soon as you are joined to Jesus by faith and commitment to Him,
 - you are joined to God's free grace that comes through Jesus...
 - All your sins are pardoned because you are joined to His death...
 - And you are given the Holy Spirit to empower you to live for God... to pay attention to Him and to obey Him...
 - And you are joined to Jesus as the resurrected one such that you will be resurrected also to live with God forever at the last day.

3. We saw that under the sun, apart from God, there is nothing lasting, nothing satisfying, and nothing new,

- But in Christ you have all of these...

a. What is lasting:

- In John 6:27, Jesus said:
 - **John 6:27: Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.**

b. What is satisfying:

- Also in John 6, John 6:35, Jesus said:

- **John 6:35: And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”**
 - Without Jesus, you will labour endlessly and never find rest—you will never be full.
- c. And what is new:
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 says...
 - **2Co 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”**
 - Indeed, you are given a new record with no sins on it through His sacrifice (Heb 10:19-22)...
 - You are given a new heart that delights in God’s ways because of the Spirit He has given you (Ezek 36:26)...
 - You are given new understanding from God’s word so that you can know God and understand His will (Ps 119:18)
 - And you are given the hope of a new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13)

Conclusion

What a contrast there is between life under the sun and life in the Son of God!

- Indeed! Life under the sun is vanity—there is no profit in it at all...
 - But life in the Son of God has the sure promise of great reward.
 - Do not waste your time in the wilderness when you can live in the promised land!
- Like Solomon, Jesus also talks about what profits a man...
 - And with these words I shall close...
 - **Matthew 16:24-26: Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”**