



Speaker:
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The Futility of Life

Ecclesiastes

11/21/2022 (MON) | Bible: **Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

Life is pointless. Unless a man has some religious belief which says otherwise, he must conclude life is without meaning and very brief.

The Preacher here says, “Vanity of vanities...Everything is vanity!” Why are we here? What’s the point of it all?

Through his servant, God would have all men brought to this point—forced to admit the utter futility of existence.

However, this preacher, like Job, understands there’s something more. There’s *God*. There are *his purposes*. And these men concluded that the only way to find real meaning in life was the fear **of God**.

Historically, many have spoken about this book negatively. They say it’s confused and self-contradictory. There are others who don’t like some of the doctrines they meet here.

The sayings of the author—or authors—may seem to contradict each other sometimes. But perhaps that’s because people have misunderstood the style and aim of the book. And as for their preconceived ideas being undermined, maybe it’s time for them to re-evaluate their doctrines. They should bear in mind there are other Scriptures teaching the same things.

It’s true: even among Bible commentators, there are plenty of disagreements about how we should understand the book. **But everyone agrees on the main point of the book: without God, there is no meaning in life.** And that will be our emphasis throughout.

Let’s talk about how I intend to tackle this book. Normally, I’d take a paragraph or chapter and find the most prominent theme as the basis for my message.

This book is structured a little unusually. Almost the whole thing is a presentation of a problem which doesn’t have its final solution until the end of the book. So as we look at all the chapters, we’ll consider them in the light of what we know from later on about the authors’ faith in God.

It’s often difficult to know how to break up a book of the Bible into logical chunks to preach from. I’ve committed myself to these first eleven verses. And they amount to an

introduction. They form a proposition in the form of a question: “What advantage does man have?”

What about the authorship of the book? There seems to be more than one author. One of them is called “The Preacher.” The word in Hebrew is a name. The name is *Kohelet*.

I’ve compared dozens of different translations of the Bible. And only one keeps it as a name. All the others treat it as a function or a role and translate it as “preacher” or “teacher.”

For those who are interested in the origins of words, the title of the book, *Ecclesiastes*, is named after Kohelet, which technically means “the one who gathers people together.” The gathering of God’s people is called in Greek *ecclesia*, so it’s easy to see how we arrive at *Ecclesiastes*. Anyway, you can see why most of the translators understood this to refer to a preacher, even if their decision is a bit questionable.

Evidence within the book suggests Kohelet could be a name or title used by **Solomon**, for himself. It’s been argued that some of the language within the book doesn’t sound like that of a king, but I’m not convinced by those arguments. It seems clear to me Kohelet is indeed Solomon.

There seems to be another author, and it’s likely he’s the one who’s giving advice to his son. Still, most of the book are the words of Kohelet—or Solomon—himself.

The question posed for us in verse three—“what does a man gain...?”—isn’t answered in today’s reading. Instead, these first eleven verses set the scene for the rest of the book. In the weeks to come, we’ll see questions, reflection and, hopefully, plenty to bless our souls.

Kohelet’s negativity

“Vanity of vanities” says the Preacher.

“Vanity” is one of those words which has changed its meaning. It sounds to us like it’s about a vain person, by which we mean someone who’s always looking in the mirror and thinking how lovely they are!

In the Old Testament, the word refers to breath, breeze or vapour. But it’s used to describe things which, **like** a vapour, have no substance and don’t last very long. It’s used in this book to picture the meaningless of man’s life.

You’ll see in verse two Kohelet uses the word five times. Not only this; he uses the term “vanity **OF** vanities” for extra emphasis. We’ve seen that device used before in terms like, *King **OF** Kings* and *Holy **OF** Holies*.

He wants us to understand that, of all the things which we might describe as pointless, *it’s life itself* which is the most meaningless and even absurd.

Verse three takes us straight to the crux of the matter. People spend their whole lives working hard—but for what? You all know people who throw themselves into their career. They think making money to spend on themselves or their family creates meaning in their lives.

The teacher uses the term “under the sun” a lot, as in verse three. It means “under heaven” or “on earth.” For most of this book, his language is from this perspective.

Jesus warned about spending your life toiling for material gain:

Mark 8:36—For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

No matter how successful a man thinks he has become; no matter how much wealth he accrues in his lifetime; in no time at all, he’ll be overtaken by time or circumstance, and his life will end.

And for such a one, who’s devoted himself to **his** life or **his** family rather than God, nothing remains except to appear at God’s judgement. Stripped of all he spent his life working for and even the good he thought he’d done in life counting for nothing.

As you get older, you find yourself telling younger people just how quickly life passes by. When you’re the age of our youngest daughters, you think differently. You see even middle age as something far on the horizon.

But if they reach the age of thirty, they’ll be asking themselves, *What happened to my twenties? That wasn’t an entire decade, surely!*

And when they reach forty, the previous decade will appear to have passed even more quickly. And the same for fifty and sixty. People who reach pensionable age marvel at this. They talk about things which happened when they were children as if they were just a few years ago.

Psalm 90:10—The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

In the modern age—in developed countries, at least—it’s not unusual for people to live past ninety. But there’s not one that doesn’t suffer with their bodily or mental health.

We spend our lives toiling in education, in jobs, in the care of our families. But in a moment, we’re gone.

Nature’s constancy compared

The next section begins at the end of verse four and goes on to verse eight.

Kohelet reminds people of things we observe in the natural world. There's the sun rising and setting each day. There's the wind which blows round and round. And there's the rivers, constantly flowing into the sea.

The common understanding of this among scholars is as follows. When we see these natural cycles which go on and on forever, we're reminded about the cycle of man's existence. Just as these natural cycles take place without bringing about any real change, so it is with man. Generations come and go, but no real improvement is made to the moral state of mankind, and the same sins are committed.

How the scriptures are understood largely dictates how they're translated. And it's the interpretation I've just given you which led to the translation of verse eight. "All things are full of weariness" it says. *All these things*, it seems to say, just go round and round for no good reason.

I'm always reluctant to adopt a view which is in the minority. I don't mean I'm frightened of being in the minority or even being the only person alive who believes something. That itself doesn't bother me one bit.

But I must use a bit of wisdom here. If most of the best minds have applied themselves to a text and come to the same conclusion, I need a very good reason to disagree with them. In all likelihood, they got it right. Nevertheless, there are times when we feel constrained to respectfully disagree. We're thankful for Luther, yes?

I have a different perspective on this passage. The phrase which, oddly, the commentators never seem to address is in the end of verse four. It talks about how generations come and go then says, "BUT...the earth REMAINS...for ever." It's *contrasting* the natural world with the life of man. Do you see?

Here's how the comparison works:

- The life of man is temporary. There's this short existence followed by death, and a brand-new generation springs up. And *that* generation will itself be quickly replaced.
- The motions in the natural world, however, CONTINUE—and with no regard to man's presence.
 - The sun rises and sets then, as it were, runs beneath our feet and arrives, out of breath, where it started, to go round again.
 - The air in our atmosphere shifts from one place to another in the form of wind, but it's the same air being moved around.
 - The waters flow down the streams and rivers into the sea. But they eventually end up flowing down the rivers into the sea again.

And so they continue. This isn't meant to be a scientific study, but the point's clear enough. It's the same sun, the same air and the same water which cycles round day after day, year

after year. The generations of men on the other hand vanish and are replaced by brand-new people.

We're supposed to look at these beautiful natural processes and be in awe. We're meant to marvel at the brevity of our own lives when compared to the constancy of these great activities of the environment.

And it's this interpretation of the passage which would lead us to read verse eight in a different light. These mighty works of God are things which we can never see enough of and which we can never hear enough of.

Read the beginning of verse eight again. Now compare it to the following verse:

Psalm 106:2—Who can utter the mighty deeds of the LORD, or declare all his praise?

- When you and I stand on the coast, watching the sea being constantly fed by the rivers
- When we watch the sun go down on the horizon and know for certain it'll rise the next day
- When we perceive the cycles of the wind as we feel the breeze on our face
- **We're meant to be humbled by it.** We consider that we'll soon be taken from this planet, yet the natural world will just carry on as if we've never existed.

It's humbling. And as our verse suggests, all these things should leave us speechless at God's greatness and our insignificance.

Nothing original is seen in the world

We move on then to verses nine and ten.

There's nothing new under the sun. We quote this when we hear of something which is common to every generation of man.

But the truth of it goes further than we think. You might argue we have technology today that has never been seen throughout the whole of human history, and that would be true. But has it really changed us? Are we less sinful, for example, than people five thousand years ago?

It's always been the case that each generation which emerges in this world thinks itself better than previous generations. Each thinks itself morally and intellectually superior. Man likes to think his philosophy or poetry or artistic creations are new.

It's safe to say anything that we think or say or create today is not original at all. When I try to find new ways of expressing what the Bible teaches, it keeps my feet on the ground knowing those phrases and images I dream up have already been preached many times throughout history.

We're not as special as we think! What's more, the generations which come after us will fall into the same trap. They'll think THEMSELVES the best thing ever to happen to the human race. They'll spend their entire lives thinking and speaking and creating, all the while convinced they're being original and cutting-edge!

Solomon didn't want us to **stop** thinking and deliberating and inventing. But what he says throws water on any pride which burns within us when we find ourselves marvelling at our own greatness!

Man is soon forgotten

The last verse in this section jolts us with a reminder of how quickly we're forgotten.

People live their lives accumulating innumerable memories. There are stores of facts and ideas they've learned. There are images and videos in their minds of events they've experienced. **Yet when they die, they take virtually all the memories to the grave with them.**

And will anyone remember them? Perhaps the wife will visit the grave of her dead husband. When she's gone, will her children carry it on? Will the grandchildren?

Take a walk through any cemetery in our city and see the hosts of abandoned gravestones, all that remains of the memory of previous generations.

Karen and I took a walk around a cemetery a few months ago. They can be very peaceful places, with the trees, birds and flowers. And as we looked at some of the headstones, toppled over and faded so much you could hardly read them, I remember saying something to Karen similar to what we're talking about today. I said to her how sad it was that we're looking at a name on a gravestone of someone who's been forgotten.

This had been a person. They played as children. They'd perhaps been married and had children of their own. They'd likely experienced happiness—and sadness—during their lives in the same ways we do. They'd enjoyed the same sun and admired the same stars as us. And now, the only people who think about them in any way are strangers like us who pass by and happen to look at their headstone.

Throughout history, people have understood they must leave the world behind. And some of them have found this alarming. The ones who have the means to do so will often try to immortalise themselves in some way.

Sometimes, it's through accomplishments. For example, we learn the ancient kings of Assyria would try to build something special or have some great military victory they think will cause them to be remembered forever.

The poet Shelley authored a poem called *Ozymandias*, which is simply the Greek name for one of the Egyptian pharaohs. He writes:

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage [face] lies...
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'...*

Although this is just a poem, it's based on a real archaeological find. What remains of this big statue of the pharaoh is now in one of the museums, probably the British Museum. And although we can link these remains with a specific individual, can it be said that we remembering **him**? All that remains are a few facts *about* him. *We don't remember the person he was.* We might even say the shattered remnants of his statue will only cause him to be remembered as a fool who thought he was special.

Purpose is found in God alone

Kohelet's proposition is a bleak one:

- Man's life is both without meaning and brief
- He works hard but without real purpose
- He brings nothing new to this world
- The earth carries on as normal after he's gone
- And he's soon forgotten, disappearing into the oblivion of time.

If you think this is far removed from the message of the gospel, you'd be dead wrong. If a man or woman ever reaches a position where they finally see the futility of their existence, we should count it as a mercy of God. Their thinking's right, as far as their thinking goes, and I really have painted this dismal picture to sinful men and women in open-air preaching.

And should God continue in his merciful approaches to that person:

- They'll see **him**
- They'll understand that the futility of their life is a result of their being without Christ
- They'll come to see the pursuits of man during his life are absurd
- And they'll realise if they only ever see things from a "under the sun" perspective, without any consideration of the truth of God, they'll see all their work...and friendships...and creations...**are utterly pointless.**

I hinted earlier we should stop making excuses for this book and instead really treasure it. I said there were references outside the book which endorse it. Here's one:

Romans 8:20—For the creation was subjected to **futility**, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it...

The apostle Paul, possibly having Ecclesiastes in mind when he wrote this letter, confirms God put the world in this state of futility. Fallen man could never fulfil the purpose originally intended for him. He would find himself in a state of hopelessness.

But God didn't intend to leave men in this state forever. At the very same time he was pronouncing his Genesis curses on men, women and the whole creation, **he was leaving them with a clue to their redemption.**

We have the great advantage of knowing who Jesus was, what he taught and what he did for his people. More than that:

- We have **faith** in him
- We understand he humbled himself and came into this sinful world
- We remember he too was born, grew up, learned and taught, and then died
- And we recall that, in doing this, he identified with us in our hopelessness, *but showed himself as the remedy for it.* Because in him we have forgiveness and life everlasting.

The Preacher had faith too. He may not have known the Messiah quite as we do, but he *hoped*. And like Job, he understood the necessity of a true fear of God as the starting point for getting heavenly wisdom.

All is vanity...unless you have Jesus Christ as Lord!

Amen.