

With God's help I want to bring God's Word to you from *the Gospel according to Ecclesiastes*.

Some might view Ecclesiastes as the unspiritual rant of a backsliding King Solomon, but we must remember that this book, every word of it, is God's word to us. The end of the book says so: these words of wisdom are **given by one Shepherd**. (12:11) That Shepherd is Jesus Christ; these words are His Word to us.

They are given to us by God through His servant, **the Preacher, King over Israel in Jerusalem**. (1:1,12) Though Solomon is not named and we cannot say it with complete certainty, we believe he is the one God used to write this inspired and infallible book.

Sometimes God points sinners to His Light by proclaiming the Light to us *directly* - by declaring to us the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. At other times God points sinners to His Light *indirectly* - by showing us the darkness and vanity of life in a fallen world so that we see our desperate need for His Light.

The first way is *positive apologetics*: declaring the truth forthrightly. The second way is *negative apologetics*: showing the darkness, emptiness and foolishness of the lie. The Lord God uses the second way of directing us to His Light in the book of Ecclesiastes. May He open our eyes to see the darkness and pointlessness of life without Him, and move us to seek true Life and Meaning in Him.

Ecclesiastes opens with the book's main subject: a **Quest for the Meaning of Life**. In Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 the Lord leads us to ask three key questions in this **Quest for the meaning of Life**:

- 1) What is the **problem** (of life in this world)?
- 2) What's the **profit** (of life in this world)? [he gives us 7 pictures of this]
- 3) What's the **point** (we must learn as we live in this world)?

1) What's the Problem (of Life in this world)?

The Preacher presents the **problem** right up front (1:1-2) and ends the book with the same words (12:8): **The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."**

The word **vanity** means **emptiness** (or meaningless). Does life ever seem meaningless and purposeless to you? Does life ever look dreadfully empty and useless to you? If so, you are not alone. It's an age-old problem not unique to our generation. It's as old as sin. Yet it is very applicable to our generation, addressing both backsliding believers and unbelieving skeptics. It is very relevant in a world of postmodern secular liberalism which has rejected God.

This is the problem that Ecclesiastes addresses: the problem of the experience of *nothingness, meaninglessness, and deep existential darkness*. Maybe you've heard or read the words of the English poet William Shakespeare in Macbeth where Macbeth says:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
to the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
and then is heard no more. It is a tale
told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing. [Macbeth Act 5, scene 5, 19-28]*

In the 1970s, when western culture was entering the depths of its crisis of meaning, many popular songs mourned the vanity of life. One song, "Dust in the Wind," (Kansas) complained:

*Same old song,
just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind, All we are is dust in the wind*

Wimbledon tennis champion Boris Becker achieved everything: He was athletic, powerful, very wealthy, famous, yet when he wrote in his memoirs about what life was like at the top, he said: *I have no inner peace. I have reached the top, I have reached the pinnacle, and there is nothing there. Nothing.* How many stars and celebrities have discovered this truth, and many common people besides?

Solomon, too, had reached the pinnacle of life. He had it all: Wisdom. Wealth. Achievements. Women. Fame. Power. He was at the top, but even though he had it all, he cried out in despair: *It's all **vanity!** My life is empty. Meaningless, dust in the wind, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.*

In this book Solomon is going to take us for a walk, a slow and painful walk, through the meaninglessness he met in his life, and that many meet. He is going to show us where human intelligence (wisdom) takes us (1:12-18); pleasure, amusement and possessions (2:1-11); and hard work (2:12-26). But no matter what road he takes under the sun it leads to a dead-end.

But he's also going to show the only *answer* to meaninglessness. Some who are in despair want to stay there; they want to bemoan the darkness but don't want to run from it toward the Light God offers. They hope to find power and satisfaction in raging against the dark night. But Ecclesiastes doesn't allow for that. In this book God steps in over and over to give help and hope only to those who run to Him for the Light.

The word **vanity** is **hebel** in Hebrew. It is used 38x in Ecclesiastes. It means vapour, breath, vanity, futility. Like steam coming out of a kettle, you see it just for a second and then it dissipates into thin air. The term is first used in Genesis 4 - **Later Eve conceived and gave birth to his brother Abel**. Abel, Cain's brother, is actually **Hebel**, the exact same word that is used here. **Emptiness. Here today, gone tomorrow. Pointless.**

Abel's life is what his name means: empty futility. He was a good man, a God-fearing man, he trusted in God, he put His faith in the promised Jesus, yet he died young, murdered in cold blood, and his blood cried out from the ground. Meaningless! And as you travel through Ecclesiastes Solomon will point out many things ("enigmas") like Abel that are meaningless. Empty. Futile. Useless. Senseless.

To really understand this word and this problem you have to go to the New Testament, where Paul uses the Greek form of that word in Romans 8:20-21: **For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.**

Meaninglessness, vanity, futility is the **curse** that God brought on a world fallen in sin. The birthday of vanity is when Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, and cut themselves off from God. Sin brought the futility of vanity to life. It is a life of being far away from God, of living **under the sun** is under a curse, where everything eventually breaks down or falls apart. You spend your life investing in your retirement and then you get sick and die and someone else takes it away from you. Vanity, futility is the terrible darkness of a life that is going nowhere, of living in a broken world that you cannot fix. Science can't fix it. Money can't. Power can't. Pleasure can't.

It is a life that cries out from the ground like Abel for an answer that is bigger and higher than this world. Earth cannot fix earth. The answer to futility must come from *above* the sun - from the God our Creator. The only way to break through the wall of futility is the God who came down and stood in Abel's place and took our futility upon Himself and destroyed it by dying for our sin and rising again!

But not so fast! God wants us first to walk through the valley of the shadow of death so we hit rock bottom and realize that the answer to the meaning of life cannot be found down here under the sun. He wants us to look up, not down, for the cure. *Who better than Solomon to illustrate the futility of life without God? He had everything that anyone could ever want. But the world is not enough. If it could not satisfy the richest, wisest king in the world, it will never satisfy anyone.* (Phil Ryken)

2) What's the profit (of life in this world)?

Solomon begins this tour of **vanity** with the question: **What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?** (1:2) The word '**profit**' is a commercial word: what do you gain from hard work and sweat and tears? Does it pencil out? Is life worth it? Is life worth the work you put into it? Is life worth the worry you put into it? Is life worth your investment of education, energy, time, and talent?

He paints 7 pictures of life that lead us to ask the question: is life in this world really going anywhere? Isn't life just a merry-go-round, where you get off right where you started, so that, even though you worked hard, you really accomplished nothing?

#1: One generation passes away, another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. (1:4)

Life is transient. The earth buries generation after generation of people. **Man is born to die as surely as the parks fly upward** (Job). From the moment we're born death is on the horizon, and we'll soon be replaced by the next generation. By the time you hit 30 the new generation considers you out of touch; you're a "has-been." Life is transient.

#2: The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. (1:5) Life is marked by repetition. Same old, same old. Each day you get up and say, *here we go again*. Each Monday the minister starts new sermons and says, *here we go again*. Each day you go back to work and say, *here we go again*. Life is repetitive. Time passes quickly, year by year by year.

#3: The wind goes toward the south, And turns around to the north; The wind whirls about continually, And comes again on its circuit. (1:6)

Life is circular. What goes around, comes around. It never seems to quit. Where does it come from and where does it go, we don't know, but it doesn't go away. Always moving, but never going anywhere. Round and round and round and round. Life is circular and we're stuck in it.

#4. 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. All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. (1:7-8a)

Life is pointless. It's like filling a bath tub with the plug out; the water keeps running but the tub never fills. Life is pointless and wearisome, a tiring, boring circle of senseless, repeated actions. Our groans are too deep for words.

That's how the drug culture rose. Kids saw the vain repetition of their godless parents' lives, working hard to get nowhere, and they wanted to break out of that cycle and experience thrill and excitement, something new. They wanted to break through the wall of futility. But, alas, their answer to futility was itself futile.

#5. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor the ear filled with hearing. (1:8b)

Life is insatiable. No matter what we see or hear, we never have our fill. We were created with an appetite for knowing, tasting, seeing and hearing, experiencing that can never have enough. When playboy magnate Hugh Hefner was interviewed by his biographer in his mid-80s, his biographer was shocked to find a dissatisfied, empty and lonely man. When asked what he missed most in life, he said: *a real, intimate relationship with someone*. After 1000s of relationships, he was still an empty, lonely man!

Alistair Begg writes: "Life is a huge appetite that can never be satisfied. If you have been trying to unscramble your life by filling it with relationships, there isn't a relationship with a person on earth who can deal with the deep longings of your life. If you have been trying to satisfy it by intellectual pursuits, there isn't a theorem that you can ponder that can ultimately satisfy your intellectual curiosity. If you've been looking for it along the lines of an emotional trip, there's not a journey you can take that can answer the insatiable longing that fills the core of your being."

Wealthy executives from large companies like Google and Tesla struggle with boredom. No matter how well they do and how much power they attain, they are bored with life and are looking for new excitement in building personal submarines to explore the oceans and personal rockets to explore space.

This is the boredom of modern secular culture that advertising preys on, promising you the answer to your vain, repetitious life if you just step out and go here, and try this, and buy that, and do something exotic, and wear these clothes, and get this gadget. But no matter how much we see or hear or feel or experience, the vanity remains.

#6. 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. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us. (1:9-10)

Life is past. Whatever is 'new' out there is just something old which has reappeared in new clothing. We hope that we're actually making some new, or buying something truly new, and that will make our lives worthwhile and valuable, only to discover that the buzz of the new has worn off so quickly.

#7. 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. (1:11)

Life is unremarkable and so forgettable. When someone dies we say that they will never be forgotten; their memory lives on. But I don't know anything about my great-great-grandfather. I try to get information from my older relatives, but they know very little. Do you know your great-great-grandfather? A few people get a book to help us remember, but even those books have a short shelf-life and get lost in the dust-bin of history. Life is so unremarkable and forgettable.

What a heavy burden is this futility, this meaninglessness of life! How can we live with this vanity? How can we cope? Is there a doorway to meaning somewhere? Can my life be lifted up above this veil of insignificance? How can I make my life count? How can I get off this merry-go-round of meaninglessness? Some try the doorway of drugs, some try the doorway of death, some try the doorway of indulgence, some try the doorway of reinventing the self. But how can more of what can't satisfy you fill you? How can more of *you* satisfy you when *you're* the problem?!!

3) So what's the point?

The point to all these pictures is that wherever you look under the sun there is vanity. The answer to life simply cannot lie in life itself. Life looks beyond itself. It's not found here. We are not able to create our own meaning. The saddest part of current attempts to redefine and recreate marriage and gender is that these are futile answers to the experience of meaninglessness. It's looking for the cure where the disease is: in the self. This book drives us outside of ourselves to find the real meaning to life. It delves in to some of the deepest and most profound questions of human existence.

That's where God wants us to go as we face the futility of life in a fallen world. Every once in a while God's going to step into the book of Ecclesiastes (which tells the truth of the meaningless of life without God) and advertise that He is the key to a life of meaning and joy under the sun. Knowing that He is there, and He is the Judge, makes everything we do here eternally significant. Everything counts!

The message of Ecclesiastes is true: life under the sun is meaningless and futile. What we do with that truth makes all the difference in the world. We either embrace this vanity as the life we want, or we embrace God the Creator and Saviour who rescues us from this vanity and gives us eternal life and joy.

Only the Creator satisfies; the creature cannot satisfy you.

The message of Ecclesiastes is clear: whatever is making you happy now, if it's not God, it won't last. It *can't*. Unless you put your hope in God, all your hopes and dreams and joys will perish. And sooner than you think.

But there is One who can raise your life above the veil of meaninglessness: God. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this fallen world to rescue us. Jesus became a human being, a son of Adam and Eve. He entered into the futility of life and, like Abel, was murdered by His brothers who hated Him. But His death was a death like no other. He is the Son of God and when He was crucified and killed, he was not only being crushed by futility in human weakness. He crushed it in divine power. He proved that by rising from the grave on the third day. And then He ascended into heaven to reign and give the same victory to everyone under the sun who believes in Him who reigns supreme above the sun!

If you believe in Jesus, you are joined to the only Person who has conquered life's futility. In Him, you will conquer death. In Him, you have eternal life. In Him, nothing you do is pointless because it all becomes part of a journey to a glorious destiny. Even your suffering and death become stepping stones toward Paradise. Even Abel's futile life was overcome by Jesus who died and rose for him! (see Hebrews 11:4)

The answer is all in Jesus Christ. *Only* in Jesus. Put your trust in Him!

As the Bible says in I Corinthians 15:58, after teaching us the importance of the real, historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead: **But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.**