

“Life Under the Sun”

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

In May of 1996, journalist Jon Krakauer was part of an expedition that reached the top of Mount Everest. Several of his companions were killed in the descent, and Krakauer tells the story of his experience in the book, “Into Thin Air.” He begins his account by describing his feelings on May 10, 1996, as he stood on the highest spot on earth:

Jon Krakauer - *“Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind and stared absently down at the vastness of Tibet...I’d been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Everest, I just couldn’t summon the energy to care...I snapped four quick photos, then turned and headed down. My watch read 1:17pm. All told, I’d spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.”*

Have you ever experienced the kind of disillusionment that comes after you got something you desperately wanted?

A couple of weeks ago, I began a series of messages on contentment and the search for happiness that is found in the heart of every human being. No matter who you are, no matter how old you are, I can guarantee that you have a desire on the inside of you to be happy.

I made the argument from Scripture that we have been hardwired for happiness and contentment. It is evidence that we've been made in God's image. The creature's longing for happiness is evidence of the Creator's design. Its is evidence that we have been made for eternity.

And yet no matter where a person looks, no matter what direction he or she turns, there is no lasting satisfaction to be found—at least not in the temporal things of life. The reason is that we've been made for eternity. That is why only the eternal glory of God can fulfill the eternal void in the human soul.

That is something that King Solomon knew a lot about. He had arrived at the pinnacle of life. For 40 years, Solomon had lived on the top of the mountain of success. His kingdom was a sight to behold. He had wealth, luxury, and plenty of wisdom to go with it. And despite being the wisest man who had ever lived, he allowed stuff to get between his relationship with God. Solomon had made it to the top, and he tells us in Ecclesiastes that it was a desolate place.

Solomon's name isn't mentioned anywhere in the book. Yet from what we read in verse 1 as well as several statements made throughout its 12 chapters, we are able to make a strong argument that he was indeed the author.

In verse 1, he is simply identified as “the Preacher, the son of Solomon, king in Jerusalem.”

“Preacher” — *word is ‘Qoheleth’; means one who gathers an assembly (descriptive of Moses in Exodus 35)*

The Hebrew verb that is at the root this word refers to the gathering of a community of people for worship and instruction. The idea is not so much a teacher in a classroom setting as it is a pastor standing before a gathered congregation.

The title ‘Ecclesiastes’ comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word. It is a form of the word ‘ekklesia’ which is the common word used throughout the New Testament for ‘church.’ So ‘Ecclesiastes’ means one who speaks in the

ekklesia. Hence, the author is the Preacher. He is one who stands to impart wisdom and instruction to the gathered assembly of God's people.

Notice that he is further identified as 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem.' Such a description reveals him to be none other than King Solomon himself. The story of Solomon is told in the first eleven chapters in 2 Kings. (summary)

After wandering away from the Lord and falling into idolatry, at some point toward the end of his life Solomon repented and returned to a right and proper perspective. You might think of Ecclesiastes as his memoir, his autobiographical account of what he learned from his empty attempt to live his life apart from being rightly related to God.

He had wisdom, fame, and anything money could buy. He set out on a quest to find happiness. He experimented with every form of pleasure known to man, and he surmises that none of it brings any lasting happiness to the heart. He details his experience in the book of Ecclesiastes.

In fact, the course of Solomon's life can be traced in the three books of the Old Testament that are his legacy—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

- Songs reveals the passion of his youth; sunrise
- Proverbs reveals the wisdom of his life; noontime
- Ecclesiastes reveals regretful retrospect; sunset

In the autumn sunset of his life, Solomon looks back on all that he had accumulated, all of his decisions both good and bad, and in somber tones he writes:

Ecclesiastes 1:16-18—“I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

It is from such vexation and sorrow that an old and broken Solomon writes to us, and we had better heed his counsel as one who knows firsthand. What is the ultimate meaning of life, and why does my individual existence matter in the grand scheme of things? These are some of the questions that the Preacher would have us ponder.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, we find the memoirs of a man faced with the monotony of life who tried to find meaning and satisfaction through a variety of pursuits, yet in the end concludes that outside of God it is all meaningless vanity.

It is almost as if he’s saying to us now three millennia later, “Don’t travel the same road that I did because it is only a dead end street!”

One writer puts it this way:

“Solomon was crushed by the realization that on his own, he could not fashion a happiness or satisfaction that would endure beyond the momentary.”

The world constantly tells us that we can fashion happiness for ourselves, that life is what you make out of it. Follow your heart, and your heart will lead you to the happiness you long for. And so a person bounces from relationship to relationship, from one pursuit to another, all in an attempt to fill the chasm deep down in their soul.

David Jeremiah described the book of Ecclesiastes as being “an inner road map” of Solomon’s quest for meaning. It is a classic primer of real-world, everyday philosophy that is seen through the eyes of the most powerful, influential, and

educated man in the world at the time, while at the same time being inspired by the Spirit of God as Scripture. In the time remaining, I want to direct your attention to the first 11 verses in chapter 1 where we will consider how the Preacher of Ecclesiastes begins his chronicle. Notice that he begins with...

1. An EXAMINATION of life's mysteries (1:1-3)

“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”

The way that the Preacher begins is hardly encouraging—“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

At first glance, the book of Ecclesiastes seems to take a gloomy approach to life. We may even find it strange that the book is to be found in the section of the Old Testament known as the wisdom literature. Can we trust the wisdom of someone who seems to be so burned out with life?

It is a fair question, but it is one that misses the point.

Some read the book and come to the conclusion that it is about the meaninglessness of life. And while it may appear this way strictly on the surface, Ecclesiastes is really about the meaninglessness of life **apart from God**—the emptiness of life disconnected from God, without relationship to God.

More than any other book, Ecclesiastes captures the frustration of life in a Genesis 3 world, a fallen world that promises pleasure but only seems to deliver pain. The Preacher writes with raw honesty about “things such as the drudgery of work, the injustice of society, the emptiness of wealth, and the mind-numbing tedium of everyday life—the treadmill of our existence.” (Ryken)

Hebrew scholars point out that the word used for “vanity” in our English translations is a word that means breath or vapor, something that disappears as quickly as it appeared. It refers to emptiness or futility. Wiersbe says that it is descriptive of whatever is left after you bust a soap bubble.

(illus. of frosty breath on a cold morning)

The word is used 38 times throughout the book to describe the elusive nature of life and its pursuits. The things that we can't wait to grasp in our hands seem to easily pass right through our fingers no sooner than we have them.

The use of the word simply indicates that apart from God, our brief lives are marked by empty futility. To prove his point, Solomon will take everything that people typically use to bring meaning to their lives or what they think will bring them satisfaction and show how empty it really is in and of itself. The point that is being made is that life strictly ‘under the sun,’ one that is without a relationship with God at the center doesn't make any sense.

“Under the Sun” —*an expression used around 30 times in the book; refers to an earthbound view of things*

He speaks from experience! If ever there was a man who could find life and meaning outside of God, it was King Solomon. When it came to wealth and possessions, knowledge and prestige, Solomon was a man who had it all. He had reached the pinnacle of success. And yet when it was all said and done, he says that it was all vanity. None of it brought value to his soul. Notice his question in verse 3:

“What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”

“Gain” - *profit or advantage*

He asks the question, “What advantage does a man really have from all of the toil and labor of his brief life?” The idea of effort or labor is mentioned several times in the book, and it brings to mind the language of Genesis 3 and the curse. Man now works by the ‘sweat’ of his brow.

He speaks of his ‘toil’ or labor, the idea of working to exhaustion yet experiencing no fulfillment in it all. Having experienced all there was to experience, having accomplished all there was to accomplish, he says that none of the things he had done in life brought one ounce of satisfaction to his soul.

In the twilight of his life, Solomon had come full circle. He recognized the ultimate foolishness of trying to find identity in his ‘toil’ or work. His life had been a hustle and bustle of activity, consisting of making plans, building buildings, and pursuing pleasures. No one had a resume as impressive as his. And yet, what advantage was it all? What did it really profit? Jesus said something very similar:

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

He had achieved much, but by his own admission, it was all ultimately meaningless. He had it all, then lost it all, and then much later on he finds out what was really worth having anyway.

Tim Keller says that the writer of Ecclesiastes is pushing us to the logical conclusion of our position, exposing any philosophy that would seek to live life without Christ as the ultimate foundation. If this life is all there is, then what permanent value is your life in the grand scheme of things? Meaningless! Eat, drink, for tomorrow we may die.

2. An EXPLANATION of life's absurdities (1:4-11)

“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.”

No matter what person achieves for himself in this life, without God it is all meaningless. Next, Solomon shows us that all human activity and busyness, outside a relationship with God, is ultimately pointless.

He says, “A generation goes, and another one comes, yet the earth remains the same.” The earth around us stays the same, but man is here one day and gone the next.

And yet there is something deep within us that knows that things shouldn't be this way. Man should be permanent and nature should be transient.

Ray Stedman—*“The Bible tells us that man was created to be the crown of creation. He is the one who is to be in dominion over all things. Men and women should last forever and nature should be changing, but it is the other way around.”*

People are born, they grow up, they go about their lives, and then they die. It is an endless cycle that happens over and over again with each passing generation. Your birthday is someone else's deathday.

To make his point, the Preacher uses three illustrations from nature:

- the sun rises (1:5)

Compare the Preacher's words here to what the psalmist said in Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God...in them He has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat." Or even Jeremiah, writing in Lamentations 3, says the sun is a reminder of God's faithfulness. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning—Great is Your faithfulness!

Solomon says something different here. And the reason is that he is seeing only as far as the sun, not beyond it.

Day in and day out, the sun rises and the sun sets. In other words, it is the same thing over and over again. Time marches on relentlessly, not slowing down for anyone. It is an endless cycle set on repeat every 24 hours. We wake up, get dressed, go to work, go home, go to bed...repeat.

Every golden sunset only represents yet another day gone from man's brief life on earth.

Ernest Hemingway —*"I live in a vacuum that is as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and there is no current to plug into."*

Without God at the center, life is like an old radio without a song to play, without a spark of electricity to affect the dial. Sin has left humanity in a broken and sad state.

- the wind blows (1:6)

The next illustration the Preacher uses is the wind, an appropriate metaphor for the fleeting nature of life.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The wind, however, seems to be free to do whatever it wants. One day, it comes from this direction. The next day, it comes from that direction. Yet even the wind is locked in a pattern. The same cold winds that came from the north last year are the same cold winds that come from the north this year.

- the river flows (1:7)

The sun, the wind, and now the water. Solomon makes remarkable scientific statements about the hydrological cycle, especially given the time in which he lived. Notice he says that all rivers run to the sea, and yet the sea is not full.

Perhaps in his mind, the Preacher is referring to the Dead Sea, which at 1,380 feet below sea level is the deepest sea on earth. It has no outlet. Yet day in and day out, the river Jordan empties into the Dead Sea...and nothing changes.

The idea is that there is a lot of activity, but nothing really ever changes. Man lives out his days on this tiny speck of dirt called planet earth literally running around in circles. Solomon is saying that the natural cycles only demonstrate how all our activity under the sun is empty because nothing really changes. We are trapped in a prison of monotony. The sun rises and sets. The wind comes and goes. The water flows into the sea, but the sea never changes—an endless cycle.

Have you ever heard this expression—“Same old stuff, just a different day?” That is the sentiment here. There are always more bills to pay, more emails to return, more grass to mow, more piles of dirt to move around from one corner to another until our brief time on earth is done.

It is interesting to me that our lives are full of more activity than they have ever been, yet it seems like the collective American soul is more empty than ever before. We take more trips, see more sights, have more things, yet we all still seem to be on a quest for something more.

It comes from an 'under the sun' only kind of perspective.

When the Preacher looks around at the endless cycle of nature, the machine that mankind is trapped within, notice the conclusion that he comes to.

In verse 8, he says that nothing is **satisfying**:

"All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, not the ear filled with hearing."

In verses 9-10, he says that nothing is **new**:

"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."

We can't see enough, hear enough, or experience enough. No matter what we have, it is never enough. We are never happy or content. We always want more and are constantly waiting for something else that we think will bring us fulfillment in life.

He is saying, "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt." So why would we travel the same road thinking that we will end up at a different destination than he did?

In verse 11, he says that nothing is **remembered**:

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

People have had mountains named after them, but the next generation comes along and changes the names. People have had their names etched in buildings, but in time those buildings are demolished and the names forgotten.

All of this is simply the Preacher's way of explaining the absurdities of life strictly from an 'under the sun' kind of perspective.

3. An EXPERIMENTATION with life's vanities (1:12-18)

In addition to achieving wealth and success, and in addition to a flurry of activity, the Bible says that Solomon sought to amuse himself with all different types of pleasure.

2:10 - "And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure."

He says, "Whatever I wanted, that's what I went after." And he went after it hard. Yet he says that it brought him no satisfaction. It was like a mirage of water on the desert horizon. The closer he got to it, the farther it stayed away.

His point here is that from an 'under the sun' point of view, life is a mystery that doesn't make sense. It is futile. He sums up life without God as being like grasping for the wind. Try to catch the wind in your fingers—it is an impossibility. There is nothing new under the sun.

The word 'vanity' is used 38 times, but 'God' is mentioned 39 times. And this is exactly why the Preacher shows us the futility of life strictly from an 'under the sun' kind of perspective—so that we will put our hope in the everlasting God.

When we limit our pursuits to things under the sun, without ever lifting up our eyes to the One who sits above it, life will leave us empty and unsatisfied.

G. Campbell Morgan—*“[Solomon] had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun...until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light.”*

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26—**“There is nothing better for a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”**

Without God at the center, life seems like monotony to be endured. With God at the center, life is seen as a gift to be enjoyed, something for which we are to be grateful. That is quite an alternative, isn't it?

3:13 - **“Everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil—this is God's gift to man.”**

5:18 - **“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.”**

Notice he refers to the 'few days' of life that God has given.

James 4:14 - **“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”**

The words of a poem express it well:

Life is just a minute—only 60 seconds in it.

Forced upon you—can't refuse it.

Didn't seek it—didn't choose it.

But it's up to you to use it.

*You must suffer if you lose it.
Give an account if you abuse it.
Just a tiny, little minute,
But eternity is in it!*

Solomon shows us how life is meaningful when you and I begin to see things from God's perspective. The message is not that nothing matters, but that everything does.

Under the sun, life is vanity. Above the sun, life is infused with meaning and purpose! That's why Paul could say:

1 Corinthians 15:58—“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Your life matters because Jesus gave His in order to save yours. He willingly bled and died in your place, paying the price for sin, so that those who repent and believe Him could have true life.

John 10:10—“I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

Life is found only through knowing Jesus. The Preacher shows us the absolute vanity of life without Him, and his purpose is to warn us against foolishly expecting earthly things to give us eternal satisfaction. He wants to expose the meaningless of life in a sin-cursed world in order to create a hunger within our hearts for something more.

From an 'under the sun' perspective, Solomon could look around and come to the conclusion that there is nothing new. But the gospel gives us a beyond the

sun perspective that says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (2 Cor. 5:17)

Life under the sun doesn't make sense when we view it from only a human perspective, when we never get our eyes and affections out of the dirt, failing to see to the glory of Jesus. It is only when we look up after the blinders have been removed from our eyes that we are able to truly see the meaning of life and find satisfaction that is out of this world.

Ecclesiastes says we find life, not under the sun; the gospel says we find life in the Son.

Colossians 3:1-4 - "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

Without Jesus at the center, life is hollow.

*Jesus at the center of it all
Jesus at the center of it all
From beginning to the end
It will always be, it's always been You
Jesus, Jesus*

*Nothing else matters
Nothing in this world will do
'Cause Jesus You're the center
Everything revolves around You*

Jesus You

At the center of it all

At the center of it all

Jesus be the center of my life

Jesus be the center of my life

From beginning to the end

It will always be, it's always been You

Jesus, Jesus!