

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 January 2026

Preacher: David Helm

[0:00] Again, Ecclesiastes 1, 1 to 11. 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? 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 to 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. All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

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 anything of which it is said, see, this is new? It has been already in the ages before.

[1:11] There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may be seated. Well, good morning. Good morning and welcome. Welcome to Christ Church Chicago.

As we enter into 2026, we step in one sense across the threshold of what was 2025, and we dip our head beneath the lintel of the doorway and find ourselves under the sun of 2026.

And this one thing we do know, none of us knows what's in store. It's new. It's uncharted.

It will be unexpected. Most of us know what we're going to do when we get up tomorrow morning. We know what we're getting after week by week, but we have no idea of the outcome of the coming year.

[2:28] You might be here today fully aware of your pursuits, or perhaps you came trying to discover what your pursuits in the year should be, but pursuits or not, you have no idea of what they will produce.

What we want to engage in, well, we're somewhat aware. But the effect that this year will bring upon those engagements, we don't know.

We're in the dark even though we stand under the year and its new sun. With those realities before us, I can't think of a better book to guide us than this Old Testament book by the name of Ecclesiastes.

This is our book for the beginning of this year. It comes to us, some say, by the hand of Solomon, King David's son.

And for obvious reasons, just looking at verse 1, and I hope you have it open with me. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

[3 : 49] By all appearances, one is conjuring up the first heir to his throne, namely his son Solomon. And I've also heard that many feel that Solomon wrote this in his aged state of life, having preceded in writing it during middle age with the book of Proverbs, and, of course, while he was a young man, the book of the Song of Songs.

I don't know that that's the case. In fact, it's probably more likely that what you have here in Ecclesiastes is more nuanced than can simply be summarized through the name of Solomon.

In all likelihood, you have a writer who is taking hold of Solomon-like sayings, and he's doing it in collaboration with an editor.

I don't know if you've ever published anything. For those who have, you know the angst an author has in regard to publishing a work given the editor's suggestions along the way.

In fact, I've had this happen myself, writing something down, thinking it might benefit others in reading, and you get the notes in the margin from the editor that says, can I suggest something to you here?

[5 : 19] Change this, alter this. I'd like to add a sentence or two. In other words, it's a collaboration, any publication, between someone who has something to say and someone who knows how to frame it in the ways in which it should be said.

Just look again more closely at the opening of this book, and you'll see those two voices, as it were, in collaboration. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

He might be introducing himself as the preacher, but it could be another one who's referring to the preacher.

Vanity of vanities says the preacher, as though someone else is likewise speaking. In fact, by the end of the book, you'll see the editor's comments indicating that the preacher said a lot of things, but the summation of it all is what I have to say to you.

Even in chapter 7, we'll see later in the series, the preacher is named, but in distinction from the one who has something to say.

[6 : 38] Well, regardless of how you think about the author of the book that's in front of us, what's most important isn't identifying the speaker, but rather wrestling with the main idea that speaker wants to communicate?

What's the big idea of the book before us? What's the very thing he wants us to consider as we enter into a fresh start in 2026?

Now, getting hold of that answer is as clear as reading verses 2 and 3. This is the big idea behind Ecclesiastes.

Let me read it. 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?

Notice, the idea behind the book is framed in the form of a question. You can see it there, verse 3.

[7 : 53] But it's a question that is headlined by the very provocative conclusion that preceded it in verse 2. Let's sit on this for a moment.

The question of verse 3 is meant to capture our attention. This is why the book will be worth reading.

What do we have to gain by what we're going to be doing? Certainly, we all ought to be interested in that. But even before he raises the question, he has that provocative conclusion, which is not meant just to capture your attention.

It's actually meant to arrest your imagination. I mean, look at the way it's placed. Vanity of vanities. Vanity of vanities. All is vanities.

With this repetitive force, he's trying to say something even about the conclusion of the book before he's ever begun. So let's look at it.

[8 : 59] The question of verse 3. He wants us to think at the beginning of this year concerning the things that we are to gain in all our toil under the sun.

Let's take the word gain. It's a commercial term. Think of the advantage that you're going to receive in light of your work in the coming year, in the coming years.

The benefits, the rewards. You might think of it even as the pay. What's the payoff over a life of work?

In one sense, we are entering into a book then that should be very practical. I mean, I told you that he wants your attention. Who doesn't want to know what the rewards are for the work that we do?

Who doesn't want to know what the lasting benefits are for the labor that we're involved in? Who doesn't want to know what the outcomes are that are advantageous concerning all of the pursuits that we're going to be giving ourselves to?

[10 : 10] In fact, he mentions here at which we toil under the sun. We not only need to know what the word gain means, but what this phrase means.

How are we to understand this phrase? Let me make it as clear as I can, given the study that I've made to this point in the book. This term, under the sun, is going to roll through the series some 37 times.

And so we ought to at least get some provisional sense of what he means. What does he mean by all the work and the gain that we get from that which we do under the sun?

Simply this. He's talking about this world. He's talking about the world as we find it. He's talking about life as you experience it. Put differently, under the sun does not refer to Genesis 1 that puts you back in the Garden of Eden where everything was good.

No, what he means in a limited sense is more like the sun that rises over the expressways and neighborhoods of the city of Chicago in which we get up and go to work in.

[11 : 28] I mean, in the one, Eden, everything was very good. But under our sun, both good and bad can be occurring and do occur almost randomly at any given point in time.

They occur every day without rhyme or reason. And that's what's going to happen in the coming year. Under the sun, you're going to be working. You're going to be wanting lasting impact.

You're going to be wanting reward. But, who knows how it's going to come. Both the good and the bad without rhyme or seeming reason.

That is the idea behind the question that this book wants to deal with in ways that capture your attention.

But what about the conclusion? I mean, come back to verse 2 for a moment. He put it down, didn't he, by such forceful repetition so as to arrest our imagination.

[12 : 37] Vanity of vanities. What are we to make of this word of which the book opens and will close? How are we to understand vanity of vanities?

Is this standing before a mirror and all of our full vanity? No. What's happening here with this phrase?

There are two aspects to the word. And it's important just to kind of lay it out at the opening. In one sense, on one hand, by vanity, he means brevity.

He means, this thing's momentary. He means, temporary.

He means, this thing's fleeting. His conclusion is that life as he experiences it and looks at it from the human point of view is, man, this thing goes fast.

[13 : 46] This is going to be short. Psalm 39.5 uses the same word this way, surely all mankind stands as a mere breath.

The coldness of a Chicago winter, you can see the breath emerge. Or if you have young children that have coughs and colds, you see the vapor emerging from the vaporizer left on the floor and it's here and it's gone.

Vanity of vanities. Brevity of brevities. Life is momentary. It is a moment. Within a moment, it is here and then it is gone.

That's what he wants to have us understand. Psalm 144, verse 4 says, man is like a breath. That's the same phrase, vanity. His days are like a passing shadow.

The big word behind it all is it's kind of ephemeral. You can't quite see it for very long. That's one part of what the word or phrase means.

[14 : 55] It concerns the brevity of life. But the other part is that this life is also so big, so long, so enormous, so beautiful, so brutal, that in one sense is beyond your grasp no matter how many years you're given to being in it and enjoying it and studying it.

Vanity of vanities. You can never quite get it all. You can't get your hands around it. It's too much when it comes to finding purpose.

There's just too much here for you to go after. In other words, it's not just ephemeral, it's fleeting, but it's elusive. I can't do all the things I want to do.

It's inaccessible. Never satisfied. Give me ten lifetimes to live. I might want a couple years more to take it all in.

And so, by vanity of vanities is his conclusion to the book. He's wanting us to consider at the outset of this year the purpose or the gain, the reward that we're going to receive given the temporal nature of our own existence, given our momentary lives in the midst of life's great and horrific and mysterious outcomes.

[16 : 29] outcomes. This is the book, then, that we need because it will inform us of your pursuits and your purpose, of your expectations of what you're going to get or not get or what you ought to go after and why.

This is the book we need in this new year. So, how does he go about it? We know it's a big idea.

How does he go about doing it? Interestingly, when you look at the kind of literature that this book opens with, you probably just look at it and go, this is a poem, and you'd be right.

He opens by saying, I want to consider what you can get out of life given its ephemeral and elusive qualities, but I want to put it down in a poem.

Now, things like prose and even an element of story are going to come in the book, but he opens with a poem.

[17 : 45] That's really 1 through 11. He has something here to say by poetry. Now, there are reasons for this. Hebrew poetry has the advantages of a kind of literature that will evoke your emotive affections as opposed to just saying, well, do you want to know what you're going to get out of life?

Let me just lay it out for you clear. No, he wants to work on your mind and your heart and your will and your inclination and your affections, and you don't get that without reading poetry.

And so he chooses the kind of way to go about his book carefully. Hebrew poetry is not like your third grade poetry.

It's not like American, let me see if I can rhyme. Roses are red, violets are blue. Come to a new year, but I still love you.

Hebrew. That's what I would do. Hebrew poetry works on a different kind of thing, and it's just good to know at the outset, Hebrew poetry wants to talk about an idea, the idea of what we saw here in 2 and 3, what are you going to get out of life given its brevity?

[19 : 09] But it talks about the idea by bringing forward image. image. It weds images to the idea. That's just the way it works.

And all of a sudden when you know that, this poem really begins to just lay down for us in simple ways. There are really only two stanzas to the poem.

The first one just lays out for us a series of images while the second half lays out for you the lasting impressions he wants you to be wrestling with in light of them.

Let me see it. So if you're just like one of those people that are like, I need to look at poetry and see it all. The idea is 2 and 3. The images are 4 through 7.

The impressions that it makes upon us are 8 through 11. What are the images?

[20 : 21] Take a look. They're all drawn from nature. They put us in there as generations, but they contrast us with the permanence of all the things that seem to be here long before we came and will be here long after we leave.

Take a look. Four simple lines. The first one, generations. Verse 5, 4.

A generation goes, a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. There's the contrast. There's the consideration. There's the brevity of life met with the enormity, the immensity, and the ongoing perpetuity of things in the earth.

He lays them both down in his opening line. He's got you and me here coming and going, but he's got everything else just staying and remaining.

He set up the whole contrast for your consideration with that opening one. And then he drives down into things concerning the permanence of the earth in order to let you know how different you are from the world in which we're living.

[21 : 51] And he does it with these wonderful, quick-hitting lines. The sun, it rises, and the sun goes down, and then it's like hermits, green its way back to the place where it comes again.

Speaking of this kind of permanence of the rotation of the sunrise. And you may change the time of day that you walk out to the point or Rainbow Beach to see the sun rising out of the lake, but you know that that's going to come and it's going to go, and it came up long before you were born, and it's going to come up again and set again long after you're gone, and while you come and go, the sun is still going to be cycling through.

Wow, that makes you feel a little smaller, doesn't it? And then he builds it by speaking about the wind which blows to the south. Oh, I hate it when it comes from the south.

No, I mean I hate it when it blows to the south, being in Chicago, right down the lake, but it goes around and around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns, and I'm sure we have some people today that could explain to me how all of that works.

I can tell you the news cycles, if you still watch old-fashioned news like I do occasionally without cable, man, the weathermen, this is the day to be a weatherman or a weatherwoman.

[23 : 22] I mean, they're getting like 20 minutes out of 30. Creating fear in all of us as they got these winds coming from everywhere, and you just want to stay inside to make sure you don't get hit with a crosswind, but these winds, you just know that's the way it's going to come.

Your life, you're born, you rise, you're like a breath, vapor, the winds will be here long after, just as they were here long before.

And not only that, but the streams. Now notice all these things he's bringing from just nature, the sun, the wind, the streams.

They run to the sea, but the sea's not full, to the place where the streams flow. There they flow again. All of these are mysterious truths to somebody like me without a scientific mind.

I mean, how is it that the freshwater lakes of Ontario and Huron and Michigan find their way down through freshwater streams that actually empty into saltwater oceans?

[24 : 32] And how does the saltwater ocean then stay stable and not just fill and overflow? And why is it that the Niagara Falls unless mankind is going to stop them, is just going to keep coming?

Have you ever stood before those waters? Where do they come from? Where are they going? How does this cycle work? Well, some of you could explain it to me, but even if you did, we would all bow before the rhythm, the regularity, the permanence, that that is the world in which we live it, and it is in great contrast to our own existence.

And so these images are now laid down, and they come with great force, and it contrasts with our transience, the earth's permanence, and they are intended for us to consider deeply then.

So how do you make sense of your life, your pursuit, your time, your commitments? Because it is going to be here today, gone tomorrow.

In fact, by the end of the poem, and whatever you do, very little likelihood of being remembered by anyone. Those are the images.

[25 : 51] What is there to gain in this life with all its conflicting beauty and brutality?

Well, there, the images give way to the impression. Verse 8, that's the headline impression. All things are full of weariness.

Kind of makes me tired. That's the writer's view. Now, I must concede that the sense of weariness, while it might find agreement with some of you, it probably comes as an unexpected surprise to others among us.

Because there might be others among us that go, weariness? Man, give me to the study of the sun, I could do it for 50 years, 12 hours a day. Give me to the study of the waters and the winds.

And so you're a little wondering, why is weariness the result of all the things that have come forward by way of the earth's permanence?

[26 : 58] Well, it's weary in two ways. And that's really what the impression unfolds. Here are the ways it's weary. It's weary given the sheer weight of all that can be said and done in this world.

I mean, look at the way he fills it out. A man cannot utter it, verse 8, the eye is not satisfied with it, nor can the ear be filled with hearing it.

I mean, there's a weight there. What has been is and what will be and what has been done is what will be done. There's nothing new under the sun.

But this idea of the, I can't even speak about it all. There's so much here. I can't even see it all. I can get on a plane and go here and there, perhaps even make my way to Easter Island.

But I'm not going to capture all this to be seen here. And I can't talk about it all. I can't hear about it all. I can't go to enough lectures. I can't hear enough podcasts.

[28 : 05] There's too much here. That's why it's weary. It's weary because of the sheer weight of all that could be done and said under the sun.

Not only that, but it's weary in the sense that for some of us, it has this underlying awareness that I'm not going to be remembered.

And that's kind of not just exhausting. That's just flat out depressing. I mean, you could see it down there toward the end. There's no remembrance of former things, or my editors say they might mean people there.

You know, there's no remembrance of the people that came before you. There's no remembrance of the people that came after you. You're not going to be remembered. I just ran into this truth yesterday in my own living room. It's with about 25 or 30 people.

They were all university age. They were all athletes, so that might account to some of this. Well, actually, it actually highlights this. Some of you might know that my dad was a coach in the NBA for many years, coach for a man named Lenny Wilkins, who was a three-time entrant into the NBA Hall of Fame.

[29 : 25] You got nothing for me on that, you know. So I mentioned this to about 30 guys who are all athletes. In fact, they were all basketball players. Only one of them had ever heard of Lenny Wilkins.

Are you kidding me? Am I that old? Evidently. Yeah, Leon says, yes, you are. But it proves the point.

It can be wearisome, not only because of the sheer weight of all that could be done here. I can't take it all in. But it can be wearisome in the sense of, why am I so concerned to leave my mark?

No mark to be left. Within two generations, our names will not be known. There's no better place to grasp this in our neighborhood than to walk out that door today after the service, walk back to the midway, take a left, go two blocks, and stand before Laredo Taft's The Father of Time sculpture.

Finished in, I don't know, 1922 or so. He's got father time, not moving, standing, looking at about a 50-foot canvas of what is humanity.

[30 : 57] And on the one side, young babies, children on shoulders, rising out of the waters, and in the middle, men and young women in the fullness of life, and warriors accomplishing things.

And then by the time you reach the other side, you can see the statue, the sculpture is now limited to smaller and smaller people hunched and huddled together as though all the aged are now going back into the waters.

And Taft took his, took his idea from a poem by Henry Dobson called The Paradox of Time.

And the poem says, time goes, you say? Ah, no, alas, time stays. We go. The monument actually demonstrates the fullness of the opening of Ecclesiastes.

You and I are coming, born, rising, loving, purposing our way through, and then receding and exiting the stage while the next generation comes.

[32 : 14] Just as the poem opened, verse four, a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. That's the book that we need to wrestle with to understand our own pursuit.

What we want out of life. What you're giving yourself to and why. I'm not going to give you all the answers. You have to keep coming back.

It's a book for your friends and your family. But in light of this, you should be asking yourself, well, what am I to do given that 2026 now stands on the front end?

I'm across the threshold. I'm under the lintel. I'm under the sun. Is this all there is? Where do I find lasting impact?

How do I make sense of life? I can't give all the answers today. It would be unfair to the poem that he presented.

[33:30] But let me say that the table that's before us and the part of the service and worship to we now turn indicates that from a Christian perspective, God sent his son across the threshold the world of heaven.

And he intended him to dip his head under the lintel of our world that he might provide for us life and purpose in Christ.

And that will give us strength. Our Heavenly Father, as we open a new year, help us to understand what to do, why to do it, what to pursue, what to expect from it.

And for those here who are Christians, may we be encouraged with our further convictions that it doesn't mean that everything's meaningless, but that everything has meaning, so much meaning, that your son would come and bring us back into the light and glory of your presence.

We ask all these things now in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.