

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, The Purposelessness of Pursuits

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[0 : 00] Good morning, and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. We're glad that you're here, and I am thrilled for where we are in our series.

Just a word, really, before beginning the sermon, if you're visiting with us, we opened the year 2019 acknowledging that we did not know what was in store for us, either individually or collectively. And we wanted to open the year under the consideration of not knowing, therefore, how can we walk in wisdom?

And so we've been in the midst of this series of 15 weeks thinking about various things that would help us be wise, regardless of what comes to us over these 12 months.

So rather than getting command of one book in the Bible, we've been trying to get acquainted with one kind of literature that is presented in the Bible, namely wisdom literature.

I don't know if you know it, but the Old Testament has five books that are collected as a kind of literature, wisdom literature. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. And in one sense, they stand right in the middle of the Old Testament.

[1 : 33] There are 17 books before them, which kind of outline God's activity in the history and the people of Israel. There are 17 books after them, which really are the prophetic books that relate to them.

And between then this activity of God and a prophetic word concerning the people of God stand these books of how to live well. And today we find our way to Ecclesiastes.

I already know that many have decided that this year they're going to delve into Job because the life circumstances are already presenting them to the arena of suffering or ministering to those who are suffering.

Others are already taking up with the book of Psalms and beginning to read it over and over with particular care this year and learning how to give thankfulness to God in all situations or to lament before God.

I hope that there will be many that are reading Proverbs as we saw about I need circumstantial wisdom as it relates to work and wealth and relationships.

[2 : 46] Ecclesiastes places us in a different place. It adds its voice to the literature of wisdom. It's a book really about your pursuits and gaining wisdom on the things that we're chasing.

How does the book present itself? Take a look at verse 1. And we're underway now. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Already, gone is the format of proverbial wisdom, the language of a father to a son, or the language of a father and a mother to a child.

And instead, it's been replaced, not with this familial garb, but a family or household of God. It's a preacher.

It's a book that presents itself not to the living room in a conversation with your parent, but in a pew and in conversation with a preacher.

[4 : 02] And a particular kind of preacher, or at least his lineage is there, a son of David, king in Jerusalem. These are descriptors then, even in regard to why some would associate the book with Solomon or one of Solomon's sons.

In other words, the one preaching is the savior leader of God's people. It's a pastor for those who are trying to live under the promises of God.

That's how it presents itself. It's going to give you wisdom the way the king of God's people would have you consider things concerning your pursuits.

You can see the theme in verse 2 and 3 is laid out. It not only presents itself to us as the voice of a preacher, but in verses 2 and 3, he announces his theme by way of this almost preaching introduction, this exhortium, this...

Let me tell you what I want to talk to you about today. And then he hooks it to a question that you'd be willing to listen to him for a bit. Take a look at the way it does it. He rises, he stands in the lectern, and he says, Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

[5 : 36] Five times over the announcement of his theme. But with it, the question, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

What is his theme? This word vanity is easily misconstrued.

You could think of it, some have thought of it as purposelessness. Like, what's the point? Or they thought of it as meaninglessness.

That nothing really matters. There's a better understanding of the word, though, that vanity is trying to capture.

The word itself, in the Hebrew tongue, carries the connotation of breath, vapor. Think of it this way.

[6 : 43] Brevity. It's almost as if the preacher who wants to talk to you about your pursuits in the coming year, says to you, I want you to know this before we begin.

It's brief. If you want to live well, if you want to live wisely, know this. Life is short. It's short. Which is difficult to understand if you're setting out.

Many of you, your entire life pursuits are completely before you. Others of us find our way well, well into and through them.

Some are, for the most part, looking back upon the things they were going to give themselves to.

But wise living is announced by the theme of life's brevity. Billy Graham died at the age of 99.

[7 : 59] Somewhere in his 80s, I think, somebody asked him what surprised him most. I mean, this is a man that accomplished much. Traveled the world many times. Really was productive, to say the least.

But when answering the question, what surprised him most, it was simply this. How fast it all went. The brevity of life. The vapor nature to it.

That's the theme. As you consider your pursuits, consider how brief that window is for you.

My father was, as I've mentioned in the past, and remains to be a very productive individual. And there were times where he would stand before me like this.

And he would say, David, that's a window. And let me show you your life. And he would just go like that.

[9 : 08] To indicate how fast the window of opportunity is to be about anything. The book of wisdom, then, would have you remember the brevity of life.

That word vanity, if this is a book you give yourself to in the coming year, you're going to see it over and over and over again throughout the whole book.

There's another phrase that you're going to see throughout, too. And that's embedded in the question that he asks you. What does a man gain by the toil at which he toils?

Here it is. Under the sun. This is the question. I mean, imagine life as a door frame with a lintel.

And you and I step now into 2019 looking for wisdom on our pursuits. You step under the lintel into the world in which we know it.

[10 : 13] To be under the sun is to be in the land of the living rather than the dead. But it can also carry the poetic connotation of what does life look like when I don't see anything beyond the sun?

What does the world present itself as if one considers that there may not be a God? What do I pursue? What is before me under the sun?

And indeed, by way of a question, what does a man gain by all the work that he or she would give themselves to while they're in the land of the living?

That's the way the book is presented. The preacher in the pulpit giving you wisdom for the coming year, announcing the brevity of life.

And a consideration of what you hope to get out of it. What do you hope to gain by it?

[11 : 22] I can't think of a theme more wonderful than this. Our pursuits. Because believe me, we are all chasing something.

We are all chasing something. Stephen Crane, American poet, died at the age of 28.

Wrote these words. I saw a man pursuing a horizon. Can you picture it?

I saw a man pursuing a 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. See, this is the wonderful poetic description of pursuit.

[12:34] We're pursuing a horizon. But the horizon is always the horizon. Round and round they sped. And you can be accosted to say, you're never going to get there, but we go on anyway.

Let me put it real clearly then. Since life is brief, what do you want to get out of it?

What happens in the following verses then, at least in the introduction, is just poetically spectacular. What happens here is there is this contrast put forward between the brevity of life as we know it and the permanence of the earth as it is presented to us.

Look at the way this happens in verses 4 through 7. This contrast is put forward in verse 4. A generation goes and a generation comes.

[13:48] There's the turning over and the brevity of the human enterprise. A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

In other words, the brevity of life is accentuated by the apparent permanence of the earth. And so he goes into three metaphors, three images, within the created order to show you that while you and I will come and go, the earth is ever fixed.

He's wanting the brevity of life to be impressed upon you, and he does it by driving down these images within the created order so that it can settle upon your mind.

You can see it there. It's the sun in verse 5. It's the wind in verse 6. It's the streams in verse 7.

And they all are under the banner of an earth that remains forever. The sun.

[15:06] It rises. It goes down. It ever seems to be running to the place where it will rise again.

This repetition day by day.

The wind. It blows to the south and goes around to the north around and around goes the wind and on its circuits the wind returns.

This not just running to its place of origination and repeating but this returning. This movement that will not end.

He's looking at the created order and he's seeing the fixed nature of it. The streams. They run to the sea but the sea is not full.

To the place where the streams flow there they flow again. I don't know if you've ever stood by the Niagara Falls. If you haven't it's one of the more powerful moments powerful sensory moments you can have.

[16:30] You are literally able to stand a few feet over a thick wall thank goodness from what is this massive movement of water.

And when you stand there you're struck with the nature of where is all this water coming from and how is it that wherever it's coming from doesn't run out or how is it that whatever it is running into doesn't back up and then you consider that it has been going on not just in these five minutes where you watch its powerful movement but it's been going on for not years not decades but century upon century upon century with the same force.

So what the preacher is saying is there's something about the world in which we live which is permanent fixed although generations come and generations go.

It will be here long after you and I have seen it. You'll stand outside today and you'll feel the wind that wind will circle its way long after we're gone.

The sun the beauty of seeing a sunset only to be sure that tomorrow it will happen again.

[18:10] These three poetic lines are meant to do something that straightforward teaching can't do for us. See the beauty of poetry is it allows an idea to settle refrain by refrain by refrain life is short but the earth in contrast to our existence is apparently fixed.

I was thinking of this in Genesis 8 this last couple of weeks where there was a flood and then the word of God appears then to Noah and his family and one of the things God indicates to him when you would have expected all of humanity simply to be judged because they were living in rebellion to their maker I mean nothing was going to change after the flood that wasn't already present before the flood namely the rebellion of the people who walked on the face of the earth but God says while the earth remains seed time and harvest cold and heat summer and winter day and night shall not cease in other words God is saying

I am I am going to fix the earth even though those who dwell on it will come and go and it will remain that way until he calls the curtain down if you read all of the scriptures and creates a new heaven and a new earth life is short verses 4-7 the brevity of life accentuated by the permanence of the earth but then it moves in verses 8-11 here the profitability of our pursuits then are challenged by what we know through personal experience the brevity of life and the permanence of earth our pursuits in life and our personal experience that helps us understand them look at the way these things fall out verse 8 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 is he saying not now that I know life is brief now that I know the earth has a sense of permanence that I do not there is meaning brought to this and that as

I experience that reality there's a fullness but it's of weariness and there's an unfulfilledness in the sense of not being satisfied you see how it's put all things are full of weariness a man cannot utter it notice the senses are brought in he can't even speak about his pursuits in a way that begins to satisfy his own desire for what he would accomplish in life words cannot utter it and then he says the eye is not satisfied with seeing the ear filled with hearing in other words the profitability of our pursuits are challenged by the personal experience that we understand namely this there's something about our pursuits wherein we will be unfulfilled that's the word unfulfilled we'll be full but never fulfilled we'll be productive but never feeling we're getting done what we want to get done we'll see something that becomes our vision for life that we're going to go after but it won't satisfy the way in which it appeared to us inside and behind the retina in fact it'll be to the point where we won't really have words to express that all my pursuits have a measure of being unfulfilled it's interesting this idea

Jesus the shepherd of Israel Jesus the preacher Jesus the one who would help lead you in wise living ask the question what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul again he's he's challenging what are you trying to get out of life Socrates I think said something to the effect that an unexamined life isn't worth living in other words you've got to really think your way clear on what you're pursuing if you're going to live well and in biblical literature this is the book that has you stop long enough to consider what do

[24 : 33] I want to get out of life and one of the first things you need to understand is there's an element of continually being frustrated or being unfulfilled not only that look at the way it goes on not only is there a frustration that's involved but you're never really going to come up with something fresh now if you're here doing a PhD thesis they've already told you that you won't be granted your PhD unless you've contributed in some miraculous way to original thought like you're going to do something original that no one else has ever done or thought of before I mean come on let's go back to an original let's go back to Bob Dylan who said if there's an original thought out there I could sure use one right now this this idea of doing something new or fresh is a little bit an illusion so if your pursuit in life in the coming year is to make a contribution to the effort of humanity in a way that will bring some lasting impact of newness originality what it says here is simply this verse 8 and 9 what has been is what will be what has been done is what will be done and there is nothing new under the sun to which he attaches the question is there a thing of which it is said see this is new it is already been in the ages before us now this doesn't mean that you're not going to we had iPhones now and we didn't have them then and there's not going to be a building contribution on life but

I'm talking about I'm talking about creating something this may improve on Alexander Graham Bell in ways that they never could have imagined but gaining information from anywhere around the world or speaking to someone in a different place well that's been around a long time there's nothing new never fresh so unfulfilled never fresh this is what our personal experience teaches and then look at the way it closes down verse 11 there's no remembrance of former things nor will there be of any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after unfulfilled not completely fresh and the end of the game forgotten forgotten our pursuits will be forgotten you need to know this before you set out there's no remembrance of the former things that is the former things are forgotten nor will there be any remembrance of the latter things that is the future things which haven't even been done yet are going to be forgotten forgotten you need to know that you live between forgotten and will be forgotten you live between that window think of it let's make this as simple as possible in your mind state your parents names in your mind state your grandparents names in your mind state both sets of your great grandparents names in your mind tell me what you

know about your great grandparents that's two generations away nearly forgotten well we are we are here for a moment but our personal experience would have us know this is wonderful literature I hope you're not discouraged this morning this is what you need to know you need to know life is short so you better get a handle on what you want to get out of it you need to know that you're here and gone and the earth will remain you need to know that in some sense you will be unfulfilled not completely fresh and ultimately forgotten and that is good news because it frees you to go through life asking then what should I be after!

God and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

They are given by one shepherd, which I take to be the king of Israel, God's savior leader. They are like, look at the metaphors, goads and nails.

[31 : 03] That's the aim. That's the purpose for the book. Well, what is a goad? A goad in our day and age would be like an electric cattle prod. A farmer's stick for driving a herd.

I remember being on the streets of Haruma and Mathari in Kenya and watching a guy drive his sheep to the slaughterhouse.

And he had this long stick, I mean, probably about eight or nine feet long, the stick, much taller than he was. And when the goats and the things would kind of come down and he would be able to use his goad to keep the herd driven in the direction that they were to be going.

In other words, it allows you to stay within the rails of where the owner would have you go. And 1 Samuel 13, a goad was actually a crude weapon for a war when Israel really didn't have anything to fight with.

If you got nothing to fight, kind of the way Churchill talked about it in World War II, you know, you might not have a gun in your house, but you better bring out your pitchfork or you better bring out your kitchen knife. I mean, a goad actually in the scriptures was sometimes the only weapon I had to fight with.

[32 : 23] What he's saying is, the words that I've given you today, life is short, so consider well what you want to get out of it. Those are goads to you.

Those are meant to keep you on the right path. That is meant to spur you to action. That is meant to rouse you toward uncomfortableness.

That is meant to disturb you. That is meant to disquiet where are you going and why. That is meant really, in one sense, to provoke you, to hound you, to badger you if you would be belligerent.

In the language of Psalm 32, verse 9, be not like a horse or a mule without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

What are your pursuits this year? Reign them in with what's really important.

[33 : 28] And in light of what your experience would teach you. But then there are also nails. Now, a nail is not a goad. A nail fixes something in place.

A nail makes two things that are just out there solid. In the Old Testament, golden nails held the house of the Lord together.

In your apartment, in your condo, in your dorm room, a nail fixes something on the wall that will be set before you.

What he's saying here is that these sayings, these words, are like nails firmly fixed. This is what is in front of you.

Something has been put in place through these delightful words, and it is this. Divine truth to keep me from believing the lie or wasting my life on the wrong pursuits.

[34 : 48] The words of the preacher. Pursuits. Next week, let's talk about the pursuit of pleasure.

And where and wherein am I supposed to find pleasure in a world under the sun. The third week, let's talk about our priority then. What is the ultimate priority of my pursuit in the coming year?

But for today, if you want to live well, if you want to live wisely, you will live an examined life. And for an examined life, you need wisdom.

And for wisdom, you need this book. And for this book, you need the king of Israel. And for the king of Israel, you need the son of David.

And for the son of David, you need the Nazarene. Jesus. the wisdom of God.

[36 : 05] What do you want to get done this year? Well, it's short. Consider it well.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we close our morning thinking about what we're after.

There's not a person here that doesn't want to be productive. There's not a person here that doesn't want to be accomplished. There's not a person here that doesn't want to get up, step under the

intel, and get after it.

Lord, help us to know what we're getting after. Before we run the race, before we set the wrong object, before we would make grave mistakes that can't be undone.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.