

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

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[0 : 00] Listen to God's word from our first verse in this evening's text.

The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. With these words, the Old Testament book, known as Ecclesiastes, begins.

When we think of wisdom literature, this book is not the first one that really comes to mind. A friend of mine named Ray Pritchard, he wrote a book several years ago.

I think it may be the ABCs of Wisdom. He has this to say regarding Ecclesiastes. The ratio of regular readers of Proverbs versus Ecclesiastes is probably a thousand to one.

And he's probably right. I don't know when the last time it was that you did your devotions from Ecclesiastes. It's not, you might even say, our most favorite book.

[1 : 13] Though the book is less popular than Proverbs, the message is significant within itself. It is a message worth hearing that we come to on today and with this particular series.

What we actually have before us can be likened to a 12-chapter journal. I don't know how many journalers that we have.

But this can be likened to the journaling of the author that we have before us. The writer includes musings, ponderings about life on earth.

The way that it works and his perspectives on life. As we will hear it repeatedly, life under the sun. The writer begins with identifying himself, doesn't he?

The words of the preacher. That is, he is the convener or the collector.

[2 : 22] He further identifies himself as the son of David in Jerusalem. Such a title is close to what we see elsewhere as it regards Solomon.

We see him several times, particularly in 2 Chronicles, referred to as the son of David or the son of David in Israel or the son of David in Jerusalem.

The writer, in fact, traditionally at least, though higher criticism would probably reject Solomonic authorship.

At least Solomon as we know him back, I believe it was in 9th or 10th century BC. But what we take him as Solomon the older. This is not Solomon the younger, wise person.

But the Solomon, the older, wiser person that's in view. The writer who's in search of fulfillment, but notices also the futility that he encounters in that particular search for fulfillment.

[3 : 33] After his introduction and identifying who he is, he then gives us his thesis statement. You see it there in verse 2? Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. That is his thesis, huh? How's that for an attention grabber? Either that makes you want to either put the book down or really want to delve into it to see what is actually there.

Huh? That's the key statement, the key statement in the book. As a matter of fact, turn to the very last chapter. And just before we reach the epilogue that begins in chapter 12, verse 9, we see those words repeated again.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. All is vanity. Huh? Eight times in the beginning, in the end, on the bookends, we hear that refrain or that word, vanity of vanities.

All is vanity. Huh? Apart from the mention that we see both in the prologue that we look at today and at the end of the book that we see there, we see this particular word, vanity, it's mentioned roughly 35 times, maybe even a little more.

[5 : 04] Vanity. What are we talking about when we speak about vanity? Vapor. Breath. That's what comes in view. Things that are really empty.

Things that are futile. Things that are useless. I like Eugene Peterson's rendering of this particular verse in the message.

This is what he says. Smoke. Nothing but smoke. That's pretty easy to understand. It's pretty easy to understand what vapor looks like.

We may get vapor again in the air as we breathe before summer hits us because winter has a way of recycling and doubling back on us.

But we understand that. Much of life is just like smoke. Vanity. A popular word in the book.

[6 : 05] But also take a look. Look down at verse 14, chapter 1. We see a couple of other phrases that repeat themselves in the book.

Under the sun. I have seen everything that is done under the sun. Earthly life in a fallen world.

It's what's in view. I like the fact that we had Romans 8 read. That speaks about futility in this life. And life in a fallen world.

It's life under the sun. Living life in a fallen imperfect world. It's what comes in view. Back in chapter 1, in verse 14, we catch another phrase.

And behold, all is vanity. And here's the phrase. Striving after the wind. I like some of the older versions, the way that they render it.

[7 : 06] Chasing after the wind. That's a pretty interesting picture, isn't it? Huh? What a picture. How do you chase wind? Do you run north?

Or do you run south? Or maybe you run northwest? Or southeast? Or do you let the wind actually come to you so you can chase it?

Huh? What futility? Chasing wind can lead you many places and nowhere at the same time.

Huh? Ever chase wind? As a student? Or as a professional? Huh?

Or as whatever your role is in this world? Huh? Chasing wind. What does it end? Those who chase or strive after the wind ultimately run out of breath and then you come up empty handed too.

[8 : 13] Because when you chase it, you get absolutely nothing. Huh? Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

That's the thesis. That's the melodic line. That's the melody that runs through the whole of the book. He gives the thesis in verse 2.

But then he proceeds to defend his thesis with some very interesting and general observations about life. Notice what he says in chapter 1 and verse 3.

What does a man gain from all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Rhetorical question that really anticipates a negative answer.

What does he get? Nothing. The reference toil is to the various life labors that man engages in. Toil, as it is translated here, is another key word in the book.

- [9 : 20] 25 times it shows up in the book. What is there to be gained ultimately through all of our life labors?
- Huh? Life labors are combustible. Huh? Combustible. It burns and then it disappears just like smoke.
- Looks what he says in verse 4. Generations come and generations go. In 1998, journalist Tom Brokaw wrote the book called The Greatest Generation.
- And in that generation, he describes those who grew up in the United States during the deprivation of the Great Depression. Those men particularly went on to fight in World War II.
- Like my father did and perhaps some of your grandfathers. There were those who were fighting the war on foreign soil. Then there were those who stood by the stuff on the home front.
- [10 : 33] They made decisive material contributions to the war effort. Huh? The generation was also known as the GI generation. Huh? And Brokaw goes on to say, it is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced.
- It's quite a lofty kind of designation. As I mentioned, my parents were part of that generation. Some of your grandparents likely.
- And some may beg to differ with Brokaw's conclusion. But whether he is right or wrong, there's one thing that's certain. That generation is swiftly fading away.
- My parents, your grandparents, quickly fading away. Their hard work, notwithstanding, was not enough to keep them around.
- They're gone. One generation comes. Another generation goes. But the earth remains and others fill the space that was occupied by the previous generation.
- [11 : 48] Look what he says next in verses 5 through 7. Generations come and go, but also cycles in nature to include sunrises and sunsets come and go.
- Huh? The sun. The psalmist describes the sun. He's speaking about the heavens. This is what he says in Psalm 19. In them, the heavens, he has set a tent or a canopy for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving its 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's nothing hidden from its heat. Huh? Have you ever witnessed the stunning sunrise over Lake Michigan?
- Absolutely beautiful. I mean, sometimes when you're driving on Cornell up to the lake, it sometimes can be a little distracting because you need to be watching what you're doing, but you want to see the beautiful sunrise as it rises over Lake Michigan.
- I've also had the privilege of catching on camera a rapidly setting sun in Cape Town, South Africa.
- [13 : 05] As the, it just sort of drops and drops and drops. Huh? Southern hemisphere. But guess what? It's done, these things, the sun has risen and set for millennia.
- Huh? For millennia. The cycle, generation to generation, but sun rises, sun setting, it goes on.
- Look at verses six and seven. Speaks about another force in nature, speaks about winds blow and waters flow. That cycle, again, the preacher is journaling here.
- And he's taking note of things that come and go. People, processes and cycles in nature.
- Water and wind come into view. And verses six and seven. Cycle, cyclical, mysterious wind patterns come and go. Sometimes predictable, sometimes unpredictable.

- [14 : 12] Huh? Huh? That's the way it goes, folks. That's life. Under the sun, the wind blows to the south. It goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind and it circuits.
- And on its circuits, the wind returns. Huh? Look at verse seven. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.
- Huh? Huh? Unlike a bathtub that fills up or sink and overflows, when water runs to the sea, huh? It doesn't overflow.
- Huh? It's constantly running into it from the rivers. Guess what? That pattern has continued from the beginning time.
- That's the way life is, friends. Under the sun. Look at verse eight. Other cycles continue. All things are full of weariness, a man cannot utter it.
- [15 : 14] The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. Huh? All things are full of worrisome labor and toss. So much so, that they cannot even be fully expressed with words.
- There's more to see, friends, than the eye can take in, or the ear can take in. Too much to absorb. It's the way life is.
- Under the sun. And those things continue. We see in verses nine and ten. These patterns, these cycles continue. What has been will be. What has been in the past will be in the future.
- Past events on earth will repeat themselves in the years to come. Including things like eating and drinking. Marrying and giving and giving in marriage.
- As long as this fallen world continues, those things will be. These are observations of the preacher.
- [16 : 17] People and patterns continue. There's nothing that's really lasting. Just as life comes from the ground and returns to it. One generation comes, another goes.
- Life on earth is like smoke. Smoke. Nothing but smoke. That's the preacher's thesis.
- But the preacher does not leave us there. He'll go on in the book. He'll help us to see that earthly existence with its cycles and toils. Guess what?
- It's the gift from God. Say, Lord, can we give it back to you? These things. Life in this world. Is a gift from God.
- Ecclesiastes 3.13. Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil. This is God's gift to man. Thanks, Lord.
- [17 : 20] Chapter 5, verses 19 and 20. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil.
- This is a gift of God. Huh? So you say, well, how does one hold intention that the reality of our air-like worldly existence, our vaporous life, how do you hold that intention with the fact that such life in this world is a gift from a loving God?
- While the point is highlighted over and over in the book, All is Vanity, it does not ignore that such a fragile life is best lived in the fear of God.
- Huh? So life, even in this vaporous world, is a gift from God, but in order for it to be fully realized, it has to be lived in reference to the God that gives it.
- That's wisdom. And of course, as you think about the whole phrase, the fear of God, that is one of the characteristics, one of the catchphrases, if you will, of wisdom literature.
- [18 : 42] We see that in Job. We see that in Proverbs. We see that in Ecclesiastes. We see that, we hear that in the Psalms.
- Listen, Ecclesiastes 5 and 7. For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity, but God is the one you must fear.

Ah, listen to him now. He's journaled. He's observed. And he also gives exhortation. He sent similarly in chapter 8, verses 12 and 13.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God.

There it is right there. Living in a world whereby the preacher has declared smoke. Everything is smoke-like.

[19 : 40] But it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him. They reverence God. And in view of their reverence, God gives them capacity and ability to live skillfully, even in this life.

One more time, Ecclesiastes 12 and 13. To the end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man who has this vapor-like existence on this very earth.

Observations of the preacher given to us in the prologue. Son of David in Jerusalem. He makes observations here and will continue to strain and grapple to make sense of it all.

But let me take you back in closing to verse 1 of this great book.

You notice the reference there? The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

[20 : 57] Those words remind us, do they not, of another son of David, who too, who likewise was a king.

And living in the fear of God in our day requires that you and I listen to him. While the preacher had things to say about life, the greater son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, also spoke about life, but he spoke about life of another kind.

Listen, I am the bread of life, he says. Whoever comes to me in this fallen world shall never hunger.

Whoever believes in me will never thirst. Friends, that's life. I give to them eternal life. They will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Oh, listen to the words of the one who is the bread of life, the resurrection and the life, the one who gives eternal life, and allow those words to give us perspective and wisdom wisdom in this very life that includes vanity of vanities.

[22 : 22] All is vanity. Listen to him again. This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you've sent. Listen to the wisdom of God that comes from the mouth of Christ to those of us who are living in this fallen, futile world.

I am the way, the truth, and the life, the greater son of David had to say. No one comes to the father except through me.

Life in the son adds another dimension to living life under the son with all of its endless cycles.

So how do you endure and handle and manage life under the son? By possessing life in the son that is the S-O-N son.

And here's the deal, and I'm about to close. Life in Christ does not stop our vapor life existence, huh? But it does add perspective to it, huh?

[23 : 34] Whoever has the son has the life. Whoever does not have the son of God does not have life. If you and I are searching for true satisfaction in the fleeting cyclical things of this life, you search in vain.

it's through Christ and what he has to provide. Life in God through the forgiveness of our sins that we can have true fulfillment in the midst of frustration.

Fulfillment in the midst of frustration comes through the greater son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ. True meaning when other things seem meaningless.

Life that is life indeed because we have the life of God in and through his son, even the greater son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ.