

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 "Vapour with Pretensions"

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Father, Father, we sometimes don't understand Your Word, and sometimes, Father, we just want it, Your Word to be really, like really, really, really simple, so we don't have to do any thinking about it or ponder it or meditate upon it. But Father, you know that we need more than that. And so we thank You, Father, for You causing the Book of Ecclesiastes to be written. And we ask that Your Holy Spirit would work in our mind and our will and our emotions and our affections, that we might remember Your Word and ponder it and look for the nuances and appreciate what You've said, and that Your Holy Spirit would lead us and guide us into all truth. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, Your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated.

Get my stuff gathered. So, vanity of vanities, says the teacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Or what does woman gain by all the toil at which she toils under the sun? Now, if that doesn't make you want to get up and dance, I don't know what will.

[2 : 42] It's just one of those really exciting types of texts. In fact, I've told one of them was Jono. I was joking with Jono. Jono actually writes songs occasionally. And to another person I know who writes music. And I said, you know what? Here's a challenge. You should write a praise album all based on the Book of Ecclesiastes. Like, I'm sure it would be a huge, huge seller. People would love it.

But it's very, very bracing stuff. The Book of Ecclesiastes is considered to be part of the wisdom literature. And it's a book that people either really, really like, I mean, they puzzle over it, or it tends to be a book that they don't really like. It doesn't really make any sense to them.

Hopefully, by the end of this sermon series that we do on it, over the next 10 weeks or so, you will come to love it and see how wise it is. But I should also mention, and I ask you if you could really pray for me into this, most biblical scholars who've specialized in the Old Testament would say this might be one of the hardest books in the entire Bible to interpret and understand.

And so two things about that, or three things. One is that the Lord would help me to understand it. Maybe just do the second thing is that I don't fall into lecture mode and describe all the interpretive options and things, because that's a lecture and nobody comes here for a lecture. We come here to sit under and plunder the Word of the Lord together, the Word of God together. So just pray that I'm able to do that. So what's going on? Like, why on earth is there a book like this in the Bible? Why would there be something that says vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity? What does man or woman gain by all the toil? And by all there it means any toil, every bit of toil, every individual bit of toil, and the sum of all the toil at which he toils under the sun. And why does it even say toil rather than, you know, work? Because not all work is toil. Why does it talk like that? And why on earth is it in the Bible? For most people, they want to come to church. They think that

religion and spirituality should be something which is uplifting, gives you hope. Most of us don't need despair or burdens. And I guess I'm going to tell you right off the bat what I hope to be able to develop week by week over the next weeks is that one way to understand this book is it's a book of subversive fulfillment. It's a book of subversive fulfillment. By that I mean, it is going to relentlessly strip away the illusions and unreality that we live by and bring us face to face with reality, but in the context of who God is so that it subverts the reasons that we do things, the illusions we tell ourselves. It's relentless in subverting it.

But once you listen to the book and go through it, the things that you really are more deeply longing for are fulfilled, but are fulfilled in a wise and realistic manner. That's sort of the big, you know, picture what the book is going to do. But let's get into it. And it begins with this, verse one, the words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Now the word preacher there, that can be translated as teacher or sage or speaker or even professor. I'm probably going to use the word teacher all the time just because I'm preaching it and it would sort of look pretty absurd for me to say it. People might think I'm trying to, you know, take over God's word. I'm going to say the word teacher. And then there, some of you might know, so by the way, so the first three verses are quite important to understand the rest of the book. And we're going to spend most of the sermon on the first three verses. And the first verse is important, not for the reason that people think it is, but what I'll explain to you right now. There's a big debate about whether Solomon wrote the book. And there's hints in the book, even this opening thing that make you think only Solomon fits that bill. But there's other hints, if you're really interested, you can go online and look up commentaries and all on it, that hint that it couldn't be Solomon. But here's what I think you need to take away from it. The book is going to keep making a sense thought experiments and experiments of making us think about how we think and how we understand the world. And one of the things that we often do with ourselves is think this, you know, if I only had a bigger church, if we only had a building, if I only had more money, if I only had better connections, if I only had this, if I only had that, if I only had, like if I only had is a regular feature of how we think about things and why things would be better. If I only had better parents, better family, better this, better that, whatever, more power, more people to do my biddings, if I only had. And so what you need to understand is whether this has been done by Solomon or somebody taking the guise of Solomon, he's wanting to signal right at the beginning. And you'll see it as you go through the book. This is a Solomon-like power person.

[8 : 13] He has all the resources. He has all the lackeys. He has all the women. He has all the wealth. He has all the connections. He has all of this, that he, all of that, he has it. And he's going to discover as he goes through the book that it doesn't matter if you have all the lackeys. It doesn't matter if you're the richest person on the planet. It doesn't matter if you have all of these types of things.

It doesn't matter if you have fame. Most of the things that we think that would be better if only we had it, in fact, is a substantial illusion and is dwelling in unreality. And so that's the big thing about the title, not whether or not it's Solomon or not. It's to understand that the teacher is saying, I'm going to look at this as if I have, or claiming I have, a Solomon perspective of vast, vast resources. And so some of the people might say, well, already, George, I mean, that's a little bit depressing. Like, I mean, surely there are some times when you have a little bit more resources, you are able to accomplish something. And you're trying to, I don't know, George, if you're completely correct. And obviously, some people maybe go overboard on it. But I'm pretty reasonable about those types of things. And there are times when you need just some more resources. And the Bible is not saying you don't sometimes need some more resources. And it just seems still a bit, you said the first three verses are important to understand the whole book, but everything is vanity. There's no gain whatsoever.

Like, George, that just seems contradictory and extreme. Well, let's look at it. So that's the first verse. It's going to be important for all of the thought experiments that go on throughout the next, the rest of the book. And then it begins with this, one of the three, one of the two main truths of the book of Ecclesiastes is verse two. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, or the teacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

All is vanity. Now, the word which is translated here is vanity. This is a bit of a geeky moment, but it's important, is translating a particular Hebrew word. And how you translate that Hebrew word is going to really affect how you understand everything in the book. And the word literally means vapor. And just as a bit of an aside, I rarely critique Bible versions. And in, just so you know, in my

own personal Bible reading devotional time, I use the New International Version. I preach from the ESV, but my personal devotions, I use the NIV. But the NIV has a terrible translation of this word. It's not meaningless. It's a terrible translation. And it will only lead you astray and make the book seem incomprehensible.

[10 : 59] The word that's translated here as vanity has two primary meanings in the book. It has three primary meanings in the Old Testament. It appears almost, I think it's 70 some odd times in the whole Old Testament. And in the book of, in this book, it's going to appear 38 times. So it's a very important word. And its primary meaning is vapor. And so to understand what it means by it, imagine that in January, you're all having a chat outside. We've finished the service and you stand to chat to some people outside and it's minus 20 outside. And as you talk, you can see your breath. You can see your breath. And that, if you just think of that, that's what this word means. That's its fundamental meaning.

And you can see the breath. It only appears for a moment and then it's gone. And that's this, it means vapor. It's, it's betraying transit, it's very transience, insubstantial, insubstantial, uh, here for a moment and then gone. That's its primary meaning.

The secondary meaning is connected to the primary meaning. And it is, in fact, I think the best translation is the word vanity or vain. Because the fact of the matter is, is that I am vapor vapor with pretensions. And so are you. I am vapor with pretensions. I think I'm not vapor.

I think, uh, death is a choice I'm going to make, not something inevitable. I think I can do things that, uh, are non-vapor-like and will endure and have solidity. And so on one hand, if you are vapor with pretensions, you think you're greater than vapor. You think you're really quite something. You think you're the cat's meow. You're a legend in your own mind. You are a terror to your coworkers and your family and your neighbor. And you seem like you have all sorts of power. And yet I am being described as vapor. Having all of those thoughts is, are vain thoughts. It's vanity.

And to think that I can do types of things that have, even though I'm vapor, that will have something solid and real and enduring and close to eternal and transcendent and mighty. Those are, to try to accomplish those things is a vain pursuit. What's an example of vain pursuit? If after the service, uh, you see me and I've decided that I'm going to jump from the sidewalk to the ceiling, to the roof of this building, and I'm stretching and I'm practicing and I'm jumping. And you would, I mean, you'd think that maybe I've been having a psychotic episode, but you'd say, George, that's impossible. It'll never happen. You can train all day. You can become the best jumper in the world. You can't jump from that sidewalk onto the roof of this building. It's a vain pursuit. And so that's, those two meanings, sometimes in the book, it's going to mainly emphasize the vapor aspect and the transience.

[13 : 59] And other times it's going to more emphasize this vanity or vain type of thing. But even vanity or vain, it's based on the fact, this, this profound truth that I am vapor or like vapor and, and I'm a, I'm vapor with pretensions. And, um, and so once again, it says vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And, um, some people might say, well, George, this is self-contradictory.

If all is vanity, then that means the statement that all is vanity is vanity. Self-contradictory. Maybe you don't see it with that. Uh, just, I literally about within the last two weeks or so, I had a conversation and, uh, it's, it, I've had conversations like this countless times over the years. And the, the conversation was, I think was something, oh, it was actually, it was in connection to my sermon on the, somebody asked me what my sermon was going to be on about this coming Sunday. And I said, it was going to be on Psalm 119 and the word of God and, uh, and how God's, you know, word and speaks to us. And the person said, well, George, that just doesn't make any sense because words are very, very poor at communicating meaning. You can't actually get at truth from words and there's not very good. And, and this person, he talked for about a minute about that, but you know what? He was using words to tell me that.

And he thought his words could be perfectly understood and that his words would connect to truth. And he was, so he, every time he spoke with words, he was refuting his idea.

And when I tried to point it out to them, they, he couldn't see it. Like he just literally couldn't see it. And I said, let's just think about it for a second. You're using words to tell me that words aren't effective. So some people might say it's self-contradictory to say that all is that, uh, you know, what, uh, vanity of vanity says, the preacher vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

Well, if, if everything is vanity saying all is vanity is vanity and that's just vapor and that's sort of self-refuting and is known to the Bible is not self-refuting. So here's one of the features that makes the book reading the book a bit hard. And you heard it in my prayer. Um, especially I think for us North Americans, we're addicted to, uh, simple, clear things like, okay, like, you know, some of you work in the government or in other, in business and your, uh, your boss wants a one page clear summary of the issue and doesn't want a whole pile of nuance. They'd like a one page summary of the issue, an executive summary that they can just get their mind around. We, we like things that are like clear instructions about how to use, uh, start our cell phone or connect with something. That's, that's what we really like. And we don't like to have to think that there's something that we actually really need to ponder, that it has a surface meaning, but if you spend longer with it, there's a deeper meaning. And if you spend longer with it, there's a deeper meaning and a deeper meaning. And we don't like to have the patience to do that. And sometimes there's not just those deeper meanings, but if you look at it, there's riddles and nuances in it.

[17:09] And that's, what's going on here with this, uh, phrase, vanity of vanity says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. There's several riddles in it that if we don't pause to, to begin to consider a lot in the book, isn't going to make sense and our life won't make sense because these riddles help us to understand ourselves in the world better. So, um, well, how can we see that?

Well, we look at what I said. There's three verses are very important to the whole book. The second verse is vanity of vanity says the preacher vanity of vanities, all is vanity. The third verse is what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Or what does woman gain by all the toil at which she toils under the sun? So it's these words that help you to understand that there's a riddle in verse two. And just, here's another thing about understanding the book. In some ways, the question that's asked in verse three is what drives the whole book.

All the way through, what is it profit? What is gained? What's left over? It drives the whole book. Verse two is half of the answer he gets by pursuing this question into more and more areas of life. It's the first half of a, of a, of a, of the answer to it. And, um, and you can see that there's a riddle here because in verse three, and when it says, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? The question is, what does under the sun mean? Under the sun is going to appear in the book of Ecclesiastes almost 30, 30 times. So basically every eight verses, it's going to have this same phrase over and over and over and over again. And what under the sun means, it's basically the same meaning. If you read the book of Revelation and you pay attention to it, you'll see that regularly it uses of the earth or earthly in the book of Revelation. It's a, it's a regular, and it's 20 some odd times it's in the book. And it's the same type of idea. And that is, it's a world where the transcendent God is excluded, the triune God, not religion, not spirituality.

I'll talk about that in a moment if I have a, if I have a time, but the triune God, it's the world without the triune God. That's what's under the sun. That's what's purely and utterly of the earth.

[19:53] So back to then, what I said is the first riddle of vanity of vanities says the teacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does all is vanity mean? Well, it's a little bit like saying this, people who've maybe always had lots of money or people who are quite broke or come from poor backgrounds, but many people in North America, they can come, whether they're consciously say it or not, we come to the belief that money can buy everything. My problems will be solved if I just had more money.

Money can buy everything. And it's a very, very powerful type of idea, often not expressed so bluntly, but that money can buy everything. And those of us, many of us, probably all of us know that there's several different wise responses to that. And the first wise response is money can buy everything that money can buy. Money can buy everything that money can buy. And the wiser question is, what is it that money can't buy? And how much is what money can't buy? How valuable are the things that money can't buy? And so when it says here, all is vanity, because it's saying all is vanity, and then it talks about the toil under the sun, the question is, everything under the sun is vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity, all is vain. But what's under the sun and what's not? And what is it that's not under the sun? And how is it that that which is not under the sun is in fact important? Under the sun, we toil and toil and toil with no gain. Under the sun,

I am vapor with pretensions and pretensions in my plans. But that is under the sun. And just to make sure that you get it, that when it says vanity of vanities, all is vanity, vanity of vanities, says the teacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity, it's a superlative. So it means that it's like ultra vanity, like it's vanity to the extreme, that everything is vanity to the extreme. It's not just like an

appearance thing. It's not just an occasional thing. It characterizes all these things under the sun. It permeates everything under the sun, is permeated by extreme vapor and extreme vanity. That's what the text is saying. And once again, this sounds like it's a very, very depressing thing. But the writer is going to use this, push us and push us and push us to consider what's not under the sun.

We find that depressing, but at the other hand, it's true. And what that means is that there's something out of whack with us. And there's also a true longing and yearning that we have.

[22 : 58] So just to give away the end of the book, one of the things which is different about the book of Proverbs and the book of Ecclesiastes, they're both wisdom books. But Proverbs begins with the statement, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That's how it begins.

Ecclesiastes is going to take us from another point of view. It's going to drive us with this question about under the sun and all of our toil to conclude with the fear of the Lord is what matters. It's going to use this existential thing to get us to think about our lives, to drive us to there.

So in the next 10 minutes or so, one of the things you'll notice in the book of Ecclesiastes is that there are certain like very key verses and you really need to understand those phrases. But then there's other bigger sections where it doesn't matter if you go through them word by word, it's giving you in a sense more of a mood, more of a type of posture, more of a type of aha moment. And that's what you see immediately after this thing. So if you read verse 3 again, it goes, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? And it continues, verse 4, 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 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. I could just show you that even in nature, I know that doesn't look like vapor and we're going to, he's going to develop this more, right? It's not as if, and by the way, in this little thing here, there's a profound critique of all of the images of the circle. As if somehow or another, the circle, the cycle of life, doesn't matter if it's the Lion King, it doesn't matter if it's the Foundation TV series where they blether on about the circle in eternity, they're all not understanding the matter. They're all leading people down a dark path.

It's a trap to be in a circle. Good grief. How can you talk about a circle being infinite when it's just something small like that and you can easily see it? Like that doesn't even make any sense if you think about it. If you listen to the book of Ecclesiastes, we long for story. We long for continuity. We long for development. And if you just see this cycle of rain and the river and rain and the river and rain and lake and on and on and on and on, it does not seem as if there's any type of development. If you just look at it from the point of view of under the sun. Under the sun.

And then it goes with this line, verse 9, 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. I'll return to that in a second because often people think that's not true. Is there a thing of which it is said this is new? See, this is new. It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after. Once again, you can see how those would be spectacular lyrics for a praise chorus.

[26 : 30] Well, what is this? On one hand, when it says there's nothing new, it's an earlier version, and I was going to try to say it in French, but I would just embarrass myself. The French statement, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Some of you could say it effortlessly in French.

It's a very, very common statement. The more things change, the more they stay the same. I mean, what is new? I mean, on one hand, nuclear bombs are new, but on the other hand, there's always been wars. Just because we have newer weapons or better weapons, there's just always been wars. There's always been entertainment. So, you know, 100 years, 500 years ago, entertainment might have just been a stick and a rock or something like that. And now, you know, entertainment involves, you know, like electronic devices, but it's still just entertainment. And in fact, actually, I mean, is nuclear warfare an improvement in warfare over when you just had clubs? Like, how is that really like an improvement that you can incinerate a city of 10 million people with one bomb? Like, how is that an improvement? And the fact that you still want to do things like that, that hasn't changed. Not one iota. Has it? Not one iota. And the fact that, I mean, even you look at something

like, well, our entertainment is way better. Well, I mean, increasingly, it's, there's evidence that our bloody cell phones there are actually discombobulating our mind and making us, making it harder for us to actually think, and that maybe kids should be protected from them.

And, you know, the fact is, it wouldn't surprise me that if you could go back in time for a time machine, and back when they were amusing themselves with sticks and stones, they didn't know the word boredom. Which we are, we are, we are overwhelmed with boredom. And so, you know, I mean, there's emails, but we've always been able to communicate, and there's cell phones, but we've always been able to talk. Like, the basic fundamental things haven't changed. Like, we talk, we entertain, we marry, you know, we build things. Like, we have nations or clubs or tribes or worship. These fundamental things haven't really changed. And that's the idea, which is, it's just trying to be, be connected to us. Now, is this leading us to despair? No, there's, just in closing, I said there were several riddles with Vanity of Vanities, and there's several riddles with it.

And hopefully I'm clear about this, and I haven't lost you. The first riddle is this. Remember I said that there's two primary, there's three primary meanings for the Hebrew word translated as Vanity in the Old Testament. In the book of Ecclesiastes, there's only one direct reference, and it's to the vapor and to the transitory, to Vanity. But for a Hebrew reader hearing it, they would also know that that is the same word for idol.

An idol is just other religions, other gods and goddesses. They're no different than your breath on a January day. And the other aspect of it is, for the average, that thing of having the two words together like that, if you were to ask a Hebrew speaker immersed in the Old Testament what they would normally think of, if they think of two words together, they would think of holy of holies. That's what they would think of. That's the primary thing that would immediately pop to their mind. You see, so here's part of the riddle. What is under the sun? Well, that's described by vapor and vanity. But, but, God is not vain. The triune God is not vain. And what he does is never a vain exercise.

[30 : 24] If God decides to speak to you, he will speak to you. And he has done so in his word. If he decides to provide salvation, he will provide that salvation. And that salvation will actually really save. If we live under the sun in a world of vapor, how could we ever think that we could save ourselves or be delivered from that or create some type of permanence? How could we ever do that? It's going to be completely and utterly impossible. It has to be something that comes from beyond under the sun into our reality. And we, under the sun, might just think that everything is vapor and vapor, but that's just under the sun. In fact, the only reason that we stay together is because there is a God who does exist, who has created all things, and holds all things together. I am, in a sense, vapor held together moment by moment by the triune God. That is who I am.

And to think that I hold myself together is vanity. To think that I can become permanent and real is vanity. There is the really, really, really real, and that is the holy of holies, the God of gods, the most God of most gods. I want to show you something about how the book ends. Remember I said that all the way through the book, there's two primary truths that are being communicated to you. The first one is vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. How does the book end?

The book ends with the complementary truth. And if you turn in your Bibles, you'll see on the screen, it's Ecclesiastes chapter 12, verses 13 to 14. The end of the matter, all has been heard, fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the whole duty of man, of woman. For God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Why is it used this language of fear of God? Well, it uses it for two good reasons. From an inside perspective, inside the embrace of God and outside the embrace of the triune God. From the outside of the embrace of the triune God, there should be some fear of the triune God. Because when vapor meets the real, vapor dispenses and the real remains. But why is it important for me, inside the embrace of the triune God, to have this sense of the fear of God? Because if I am, in fact, just vapor who is held together by the triune God, how dare I slip into thinking that I am my own God and I hold myself together? Or that some thing or some possession, a car or a house or a job is what will hold me together. It's all just vapor.

And wisdom is knowing that the reality and the realness and the depth of God, the triune God and his love, and not transgressing that, and learning to live each day, each moment as vapor that I am held together by that triune God. And why is that the word, the fear of God, a very, very good word and a good realization to come to? Is if, in fact, all of my attempts at permanence, at giving myself an identity, of holding myself together, of having lasting effect that goes on and on and on and on,

in a sense of having salvation, if that is completely and utterly vapor, and I meet God's real salvation, I will only become more vaporous. I need to be gripped by his salvation. I need to understand that the triune God has sent God, the Son of God, and taken into himself not just our human nature, but as man he is vapor. As God, he is God, but he is not two things but one person. God himself,

[34 : 34] Son of God, has taken into himself vapor and died to save me. And my only salvation is to be, to receive, to dwell in, to acknowledge the embrace of the saving power of the triune God and to be held by him. And there is no other salvation. There is no other salvation.

I am vapor, redeemed by Emmanuel, held together moment by moment by the triune God. On this side of the grave, my mind is always moving to pretensions, because I share that human condition of living under the sun. But what is under the sun does not win. What is beyond under the sun is what is really real, and where real treasure and hope lies. I invite you to stand.

Bow your heads in prayer. Father, your word says at the end of Ecclesiastes, Father, your word says that you caused these, all of these words to be written in the book of Ecclesiastes, and so therefore the words of this aren't vain. I, Father, will keep coming against it, and I can never fully understand it, because I am vapor, but, and under the sun. But we give you thanks and praise that your word are like sticks that prod us towards yourself, that you take no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but rather that we would turn from from our illusions and unreality and live, that we would be prodded, Father, to receive your embrace in the person of your Son and in the power of your Holy Spirit, and live redeemed by Emmanuel, the crucified Savior, held by your embrace. And we give you thanks and praise, Father, that you hold us together as vapor, and that those of us who are in Christ, our final breath and our final dissolution is but the awakening and the knowledge that we are held in your hand. And so, Father, we ask that you appreciate, help us to move from unreality and illusion into the reality of your word.

And we give you thanks and praise that you call us on that quest, not to depress us, but to delight us, and to give us hope. And we ask and thank all these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.