

"Work That Matters" Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

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Date: 07 September 2025

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[0 : 00] Before we begin, will you pray with me? Father in heaven, we are people in need of wisdom, always.

! We understand in times of struggle and humility that we need your wisdom.! And the times of pridefulness and hubris only proves that we need your wisdom.

We need your wisdom all the time. Lord, we thank you that you are a wise God. In fact, you hold this entire world together because you are the one who created it.

So you know how we ought to live and you have communicated that to us. So Lord, as we enter into this new series in this book of Ecclesiastes, Lord, please give us minds to really comprehend what you would have to speak to us about.

And we'd ask that you'd make us wise. Wise to live this life in a godly way, but also wise unto salvation. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[1 : 03] In the last 300 plus years since the Industrial Revolution, incredible advancements in healthcare and labor and automation, science and nutrition, we have been allowed an incredible life.

A life that is so much more healthy and strong in many respects than our ancestors could have ever imagined.

We live longer, produce more efficiently. We have healthier lives. All of this allows us to pursue a wide range of interests and hobbies.

And really, you know, go back 500 years ago, describe even a quarter of what our world is like to people that lived back then.

And it would seem inconceivable. One example of how advanced we are in the life that it has allowed us to live is the washing machine.

[2 : 24] Here's a quote from a book called Enlightenment Now by the renowned Canadian psychologist Stephen Pinker. He says this, quote, Now, whether that's the case or not, that it is one of the better inventions from the Industrial Revolution.

I mean, the point is made clear. We live in an incredible age that allows us to enjoy life and life to the full in many respects. So the kind of the too-long-didn't-read of that book and really this idea of progress since the Industrial Revolution, is that materialism is a huge, and I truly mean huge, positive force in many ways.

And to some degree, Stephen Pinker is right. Who would want to go back to a life of poor nutrition? And with poor nutrition comes, like, child mortality, right?

A huge, huge part of that. Hard labor for little pay and shorter lifespans. I mean, imagine this summer without air conditioning in your car or your house, right?

It was crazy hot this summer. Nobody wants to go back to pre-air-conditioned days. But one thing Stephen Pinker and other materialists and futurists and inventors and Enlightenment thinkers often overlook when discussing this post-Enlightenment world that we live in is that more stuff, more money, and the opportunities that they provide, it does not give us what we truly desire and long for.

[4 : 18] Meaning, legacy, genuine security in this life, and life in the eternal life in the life to come. It just cannot provide that.

So as we begin this 10-week series in Ecclesiastes, this will take us almost to Advent, I think potentially right till Advent. The central figure, the preacher or teacher or sage, tradition has him as King Solomon.

That could very well be that King Solomon wrote this. I think if we focus too much on King Solomon, we might miss some wise tidbits. So I'm just going to call him the sage throughout these 10 weeks.

The sage is brutally honest in his reflections on the nature of life. He searches for answers to questions that we might find too provocative to ask, or we might see a person who asks such questions as a pessimist.

At times he seems to have resigned himself to believing that every aspect of life is meaningless, while at other times he appears to indulge in unchecked consumerism.

[5 : 27] Eat, drink, live, be merry. But the sage, he is not a nihilist, nor is he a hedonist, nor is he a fatalist, that human agency matters not.

Instead, when we view the book as a whole, Ecclesiastes uncovers a wisdom from above that awakens us from a narrow, worldly, centered perspective on life.

What it does, it really shakes us both as individuals and collectively out of our malaise, out of our consumption and how quickly we can become automatons.

We can shut our minds off. We can become dull. It rattles us. It shakes us. So in this opening section that Margaret read, we'll find that the sage addresses something we cherish very much. I mentioned this just, you know, a couple minutes ago. What is the thing that we cherish very much? Wealth and what it promises. And what does it promise?

[6 : 40] It promises meaning, legacy, and eternal life. The very things it can't deliver. And he argues that such a pursuit of achieving these ultimate things with wealth and work is pointless.

But for many in Ottawa and perhaps many of us here this morning, if we're honest, right, we want to be honest and sober people as we come to God's word.

What kind of life is there really apart from the modern way of living? Is work truly a waste of time?

Will the sage provide a better way to live?

Is there a better way to live? So before we look to answer some of these questions, we need to look at verse 2 and ask the question, what does the sage mean when he talks about vanity?

Let me read verse 2. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. So repeatedly in this one verse, the sage uses the Hebrew word for havel, or it can also be pronounced havel.

[7 : 51] This word in Hebrew, it conveys the image of a breath or a mist or a vapor, something so fleeting that you see it, but you can't grasp it. And it's here for a moment and then it disappears.

I don't want to, you know, trigger anybody here, but what your breath looks like on a cold, frigid January morning. Think of that, okay?

We're far away from that. We're still enjoying summer vibes, hopefully. But that's the image, if that helps you. A freezing cold day, you breathe out mist, vapor.

You see it disappear. You can't grab it, but you see it. It's here for a moment and then it is gone. But what does this mean in Ecclesiastes? Why is it translated as vanity?

There are several ways to interpret this and it seems that the sage throughout Ecclesiastes really explores the full nuance of the word. And that's an important thing to think about.

[8 : 51] We're not going to examine every last nuance. But we'll look at just a few right now. It could signify meaninglessness as something without substance.

So like literally the vapor or the mist that we breathe out in a cold Ottawa morning. It might also describe the temporary nature of a thing. Here today, gone tomorrow.

Like the grass in the field. Over half of the other instances in the Old Testament of this word relate to idol worship and idolatry. And then the Greek translation of this word in the Septuagint.

So the Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Greek translation of the word havel or habel is the same term used by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1 and 8 to describe a futile way of thinking or things that are subjected to futility.

For our section, I think the best translation appears to be related to the idea of pursuing something in vain. In this context, it's the fruitlessness that results from our fixation on exploiting all of life for our benefit, especially our work and labor.

[10 : 07] We misuse our God-given abilities to exploit God's good creation, believing that we can achieve a God-like permanence and satisfaction in this mortal life.

So, I mean, again, that's a lot. There's a lot of different potential meanings. It's a very pregnant word. Funny enough, a commentator that I read said, if you're really trying to explore the full breadth of meaning of this word, of vanities, it is a vain pursuit in and of itself.

But for us this morning, Romans 1 seems to make a great deal of sense. The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans chapter 1, starting in verse 21.

For although they knew God, he's talking about those people that are living unrighteously. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile, that's that word, in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. There's a connection here to that idolatry bit.

[11:23] Verse 24. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. Verse 25. Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. That's what that feudal thinking is. That vain thinking is. So, going back to Ecclesiastes. When the sage says that all is vanity, he cannot be then referring to all of creation and the good gifts that are God-given, these things are not described as futile, even though he says all is vanity. How could he then affirm that everything is a vapor, which would have to include truth itself, if the very truth he claims is vapor? So, clearly he is not saying all in a completely blanket sense.

Rather, the only thing that he is referring to, which covers still a great deal, is anything that is done or achieved or viewed that is disconnected from the creator.

Put another way, only the triune God can give real meaning and substance to life, for he is the author and sustainer of all life. You remember Colossians chapter 1, the Apostle Paul is talking about Jesus, the pre-incarnate Christ, which can be extended to the entire Godhead and he says of this in verse 16, for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him, and he is before all things and in him all things hold together.

[13:18] I mean, that is a really intense, thick few verses, but what I wanted you to understand and what it is that the sage is conveying is that to pursue God's creation apart from God is the definition of vanity, is the definition of trying to grab something for you to find that it is slipping right out of your fingers.

What is vanity in this context? It is the pursuit and effort of our work of achieving material wealth and everything that's associated with it completely, completely disconnected from the one true triune God.

If we are trying to build a legacy, find purpose, seek meaning and enjoyment that satisfies our longings and desires outside of God, the sage is saying it is a vain pursuit.

It is vanity. It is vapor. It is mist. It is pointless. The sage in verse 3 to 11 now turns to toil and labor and work to help us see how our efforts are ultimately in vain when they are self-serving.

Let me read verse 3. I'll make a few comments on it and then we'll continue on with the rest of the section. In verse 3, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

[14:51] The sage asks a rhetorical question about earthly toil. What follows in 4 to 11 really is him unpacking and explaining verse 3.

but before we go on if you can either in the margin or maybe even on the actual page in your scripture journals mark under the sun.

Okay? Because that's a term that we'll be coming back to throughout Ecclesiastes. We're not going to do a deep dive into it now but really for us this morning it is a term that really describes both the created world and the lifespan we have here on earth.

It also kind of contrasts with this under heaven which refers to a place where God dwells in eternity. Again, we'll explore more of this in the coming weeks but for now it describes this mortal life under heaven.

So we ask the question what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? The answer rhetorically is nothing. But again, can the answer truly be just nothing?

[16:02] Okay? Again, he's not a nihilist. He's not a fatalist. It's hard to kind of grasp this now but he's not even a pessimist.

So what is he talking about? Can the answer truly be nothing? Does the work of teachers, designers, system managers, armed forces, personnel, trades, people, public servants, nurses, engineers, entrepreneurs, if I've missed a category, let me know.

It still applies to you. Does this work amount to nothing? So as we saw with vanity, the answer isn't a simple nothing.

But again, it's linked to verse 2 considering the vain pursuit of work and toil, divorced from the knowledge and love of God. Working for God's glory.

Again, it means that work and toil become vain when they are viewed solely on a horizontal level without any consideration for the vertical perspective.

[17:07] But surely, surely, even people who do not know the triune God can produce work that matters for something. I mean, I go to the hospital.

I don't go to the hospital, but if I go to the hospital, I don't care if my doctor is Hindu or an atheist. I don't care.

He's doing good work. I am benefiting from it. The person that comes to do a repair on my home, I don't before I let him in say, listen, can you recite the creed and check mark before you come in? No, no, no. He's going to come in. He's going to benefit. I'm going to reap the benefits of it. So surely, even people who do not know the triune God can produce work that matters for something. How can the sage paint all of creation, all of the world with such a broad brush? He'll explain in verses 4 to 7.

[18:11] A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.

The wind, it blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around it 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. Sages are reminding us of the transient nature of human life. So our existence in comparison with the earth is almost incomprehensible.

Incomprehensible. You might remember your grandparents. You might even remember your great-grandparents. I would be surprised if half of us know our great-grandparents' names, let alone our great-great-grandparents.

generations that seem like in the distant, distant, distant past, they are forgotten. And really, their lifespan was just a blip in the entirety of human history.

[19:24] The notion that we possess a piece of land or various possessions in an ultimate sense is also a fallacy. For such materials existed long before we were born and will exist long after we're gone.

We cannot control the seasons, weather, or the natural flow of the seas. We think we've mastered the world. Our entire economy really is predicated on ocean travel and giant container ships bringing things from the east to the west and back again.

But the oceans are untamable. We are along for the ride. We build bigger and greater and stronger vessels, but we don't stop the ocean's tides from crashing upon us.

the sage is saying that we are finite. We are here for a moment. In many respects, we are along for the ride.

The earth does not belong to us. It belongs to the Lord. We make money, we purchase land and the things that come with it, but the value of earthly ownership, it must always remain relative to the acknowledgement that all of it belongs to God.

[20:44] And therefore, we do not have an ultimate claim. So this section here, it really deconstructs human pride. It deconstructs human pride.

It deconstructs the human desire for a permanent profit, a permanent spot achieved through earthly means. The pharaohs no longer own Egypt.

Like, just, it's unbelievable. There is no Roman emperor anymore who rules and owns the conceivable world. Even the greatest among us, even King Solomon, if he truly wrote Ecclesiastes, Israel's most richest and wisest king, he is gone.

And what did he leave? He left a kingdom that was just ready and rife to be split and destroyed and to be torn apart.

This section helps us to understand this, that we are finite. And how we cannot alter the nature of this world one bit, we simply inhabit it and we are subject to its cycles.

[22:00] again, going back to verse 3, we live an under the sun type of existence. And it's not a very long one at that.

From a very materialistic perspective, this is a difficult thing to accept. Because if it's true, it suggests that life really, truly is without ultimate meaning or satisfaction beyond self, beyond just a fleeting self-fulfillment.

We can enjoy the things for a moment, but they will not be enjoyed for eternity. The sage, he is shooting a shot across the bow of our post-secular, post- our post-modern secular age. sage. So, if the gifts you are pursuing are elevated above the gift giver, the sage is really telling us that we will not experience God-given joy, but rather we will experience a God-given disappointment.

Because we are using his creation in a way that was never intended for it to be used. Again, we are separating the gift from the giver, and to confuse the gift from the giver will result in constant disappointment and fruitless toil.

[23 : 26] Look with me at verses 8 to 11. 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 a thing of which it is said, 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 latter things, yet to be among those who come after. other. I'm telling you, if you're honest, if you're kind of sitting in the heaviness of these verses, if you're not quick to push them away, or to fill your mind with something else, a distraction, the things you need to do when you go home after this, do you not want freedom from this empty pursuit, this vapor, this vanity, to avoid working in vain, to stop constantly consuming without ever being satisfied, to enjoy life without constantly looking for the next hit, the next trip, the next experience, the next toy, to find fulfillment and purpose in our work and in our life during our time under the sun.

This takes us to our final section and I'll just say this before we get into this final section. It would take you about 45 minutes or so to read this out loud, maybe a lot shorter if you're a speed reader.

[25 : 25] It's meant to be read kind of continually. So we're reading verses, chapter 1, verses 1 to 11, and without reading the entirety of Ecclesiastes, this can just be heavy and really depressing.

There is hope that the sage will bring to us. And I don't want to be too quick to go there. He's building tension in the book. He's not saying this is a problem, here's a solution.

He's saying I'm going to deconstruct your faulty thinking. So there is hope, it's a bit later on. Read ahead, please, by all means.

But I'll just say this when it comes to vain work. Christ affirms the work of the sage. Christ discusses money and wealth and material things quite frequently in the Gospels.

However, like the sage, he does not condemn them outright. Instead, he focuses on the issues of the heart, the motivations behind our labors and toil.

[26 : 31] Let me read a few passages from the Gospels to illustrate my point. And again, these are just a couple examples, actually three examples. Jesus has much more in the Gospels where he's talking about money and work and motivation.

The first one, Matthew chapter 6 in verse 19. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Matthew chapter 16, starting in verse 24.

Then Jesus told his disciples, quote, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[27 : 38] For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? And Luke chapter 12, starting in the 16th verse, and for whatever reason, this hit hard in my studies.

Verse 16, And Jesus told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do?

For I have nowhere to store my crops. And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods.

And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry. Verse 20, But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you.

[28 : 47] And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? What do we notice about these teachings of Jesus? They highlight that work and treasures on earth lack lasting or eternal value when they are self-serving.

However, when we are united with Christ, we are connected to the one who is not bound by the earth's cycles because he created the earth from nothing with his word.

He is not beholden to the powers of the seas. Why? Because he spoke to the seas. What did he say? Be still. And the seas obeyed him. The wind and the waves ceased.

He is not limited by mortal life, for although he became fully man and lived and died, Jesus did not stay dead, only to be forgotten, but he rose again to new life and still reigns on high.

Everything he did was completely not in vain. And by faith, when we are united to Christ, we are united to the only one who has not experienced vanity, vanity, all his vanities.

[30 : 04] This has huge implications for us. When we are united to him, our ultimate meaning and value are found in him. We don't need to chase after the gain, verse 3, that the world promises or we think we will get.

As we work in vain, day in and day out, instead we rest in Christ's finished work and eternal work on the cross. And we join in him, in his ongoing work of building the eternal kingdom here on earth. And this is one of the beautiful things of the New Testament. It says that everybody can live a life, including their work, that brings glory to God.

You do not have to be a minister standing in front of a congregation preaching to have work worthy of the Lord. It's like as if my job is good but you guys are all engaged in vanity.

No, no, no, no, no. But a life that is turned towards God and about his kingdom, using our resources to obey him, taking care of our family, proclaiming the good news, living holy lives, relying upon him for our bread.

[31 : 20] Even though we can certainly go by it at any time, but he is the one truly is giving us what we have. This transforms our work so that it is no longer vain, but it is eternal.

No longer is it a vapor, but something that is tangible, that will last from this life into the next. Christ. So you see that Christ completely transforms our labor, our work, our toil.

He infuses it with eternal significance, something that we could never do. For when done to the glory and praise of God, what we do will endure forever. I'll close with this.

John chapter 6, verse 27. Again, the words of Christ. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.

For on him, God the Father has set his seal. And that seal is upon us if we have our faith in Christ. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you that you love us enough to show us the futility of our ways.

[32 : 34] That you love us enough to shake us out of our slumber and to deconstruct bad thinking. To open our eyes to the futility of a life that we think will give us ultimate meaning that is so self-centered and about us.

Lord, help us to be people that look to the only one who did not live a vain life. Not even 1% of his life was in vain. Not one of it was devoted to self, but for your glory.

Lord, we pray for these next few weeks in Ecclesiastes that you would make us wise. Wise with how we work. Wise with how we live. Wise with how we spend our money. Wise with how we spend our leisure time.

Wise with our families, our friends, every part of our life, Lord. We pray that the wisdom that you give us, we will by your spirit put it to good work and that we will continually live for the kingdom that is to come.

Not just for this life under the sun. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you.