

Under the Sun: Realism, Reality, Revelation

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] Right, good morning. Good morning. It's great to be here looking at Ecclesiastes. So we're going to spend six weeks in this book. I'm grateful to Dr. Packer who put together this sermon series and will preach at a number of these mornings. I'm told that this is his favorite book of the Bible.

Now we'll be following the passage quite closely so it would be very helpful if you had Ecclesiastes open in front of you. Now you've heard it read already and I wonder if like me when you first heard it you found it on one hand kind of refreshingly honest. Like finally somebody's kind of like just saying it like it is. But on the other hand quite unsettling because it does start off with a little bit of a shock. I mean after verse one where it introduces the preacher. Verse two is quite a shock. Vanity of vanities says the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Now the vanity it's talking about is not the kind of vanity from remember the Carly Simon song you're so vain?

You're so vain. You know that right okay not that kind of vanity. The NIV is quite helpful here I think it translates the word meaningless. So in the NIV it says meaningless, meaningless, utter meaningless. Everything's meaningless. Eugene Peterson at the beginning of the message which is a paraphrased version of the Bible begins with this smoke. Nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything.

It's all smoke. Well what a way to introduce the Bible eh? Or this book in particular. What a way to introduce this book. The Hebrew word there behind the word vanity and meaningless and smoke is vapor.

It just means vapor. It's like life is this evaporating cloud. It's brief and it's devoid of any real significance. So that's verse two. That's the way he introduces this whole book. So what are these words doing here? I mean it doesn't sound like, I mean we're Christians right? Surely we don't believe this. I mean we're not supposed to. It's not commending this is it? It's not saying that we're supposed to think like this. So what is it doing here? Well I think what's happening here is the writer is trying to expose a problem before he presents a solution. And the writer or the preacher in Ecclesiastes wants us to have a God-centered view on life. But before he does that he's got to lay out the alternative view. He's got to lay out the view of the practical secularist. Not the real philosophical sort of secularist. But just the practical secularist.

[2 : 43] Now how do I know that? How do I know that's what he's doing there? How do I know that's his God? Well the key phrase I think is this little three words here, under the sun. You see at the end verse 3 and 9 and 14 there. You know verse 3, what does it mean gain by all his toil at which he toils under the sun? That little under the sun phrase is used 25 times in Ecclesiastes. Now the little phrase means this, it means this. It means life viewed just horizontally. Okay? Life under the sun.

Life without God. Life bound just by nature, by what we can see and we can feel. A life bound by just, by just human perspective. So you see what he's doing, right? The preacher of Ecclesiastes. He wants us to be so disillusioned by a secular worldview, a life viewed through our little thimble full of knowledge. He wants us to be so disillusioned by this life that we run to God.

That's his goal. How does he do it? Well he spends the first chapter of his book here looking through the eyes of an atheist and the conclusion that will come from looking through those eyes. So verses 3 to 11 there explaining, is explaining verse 2, is explaining why life under the sun is meaningless. Just look at verse 3, we've already read it. What does a man gain by all the toil which he toils under the sun? The gain word there, that's a commercial word. That's a profit word.

[4 : 16] It's a monetary profit word. So he's just beginning with a question, like what is the profit in life? Like what do I actually get out of this? It's really quick and then I don't really have much to show for it at the end. Leonard Wolfe was the husband of Virginia Wolfe and he's quite a well-to-do,

well-known author and thinker and publisher and editor. Anyway, he wrote an article in *The Wireless Age* and let me just read a little quote from that to you about how he summarizes his life. And it's a very accomplished life. He says this, I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the past five to seven years would be exactly the same if I'd played ping pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I've therefore to make the rather ignominious confession that I have in a long life ground through between 150 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work. So I think Mr. Wolfe could relate to verse 3.

What have I gained through a lifetime of work? There's no profit in it. And then he bangs this idea home with imagery. Verses 5 to 7, you see there, the preacher uses creation as a picture of the monotony of life. Just the pointlessness of it all. Uses examples of the sun, the wind, and the sea. First, the sun. Sun's up, the sun goes down. You see that there? Verse 5. And it says the sun hastens to its return. This hastens where this is like a, this has a sense of, you'd use it for somebody running that's trying to finish a race and they're kind of panting, hastening. So it's not very fun. The sun's just trying to finish its kind of circle.

It's just trying to get through the day and then it kind of has to start again. I know this feeling. I have three small children and three kids under five and so I wake up anywhere between 5.45 and 7 if I'm lucky. And I'm up. I let them watch a cartoon. And while they're watching a cartoon, I unload the dishwasher.

And then if I've got time, I make them breakfast. Eggs for B, Rice Krispies for Sadie, and just some kind of mash for a little Oliver there. Feed them, get them dressed. I go to work, I come home, it's about time to feed them again. Spend the next couple of hours trying to deliver them to their bedrooms. Read to them whilst trying not to fall asleep, whilst reading to them, which happens. Then my wife and I sit down and we desperately try and eat out about 45 minutes of quality television, trying not to fall asleep.

[7 : 18] And then we go to bed and then it starts again at 6am. That's my life for about five years now. And it never changes. The weekends, I just don't go to work during the day. I'm working at home.

Cycle starts. It's a repetitive cycle. Now you could all probably name your cycles. The sun goes up, sun goes down, sun goes up, sun goes down. Then he moves to the wind. He says, the wind, verse 6, the wind blows to the south, blows to the north, round and round goes the wind.

Then on its circuit, the wind returns. Life is like the wind. It just keeps circling. It's like life is like this kind of dreary sort of carousel. It's this dreary kind of carousel. And the novelty's worn off and you can't get off the thing and you can't escape the inevitability of it.

So the sun, the wind, then the sea, verse 7, all the streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

The streams, he says, they seem to be working really hard. These streams and they're flowing and they're flowing and they're rivers and they're fast and they're working really hard. And they pour their contents into the sea. And what's its conclusion? The sea doesn't seem to rise at all.

It's this hard work, this endless activity. And the ocean doesn't get any bigger, it seems. It makes no difference. It doesn't seem to be any fuller. A lot of hard work, no profit.

[8 : 41] I thought of this, it's rather like, if you know Greek mythology, perhaps you've heard of Sisyphus. Sisyphus? Sisyphus. So he was the gentleman who, I can't remember what he did, but he did something very naughty. And he tried to escape death or something like that, I think. So anyway, the Greek gods, this is not a true story, obviously, this is Greek mythology. So the Greek gods punish him and his punishment in hell is he has to roll a stone up a hill. You know this story, right? He has to roll a stone up a hill, and just before he gets to the top, the stone rolls down. And he has to start again.

He rolls the stone up a hill, and just before he gets to the top, it rolls back down again. This is him for eternity. So the preacher here, using the imagery of creation, he just pours picture of futility upon picture of futility. It doesn't really stop. Verse 8 to 10, and on top of everything else was said so far, he says, we don't seem to be making much progress either. He sums it up, he goes, there's nothing new under the sun. No one can say, oh, this is new. What he's getting at is, he's talking about progress. There's nothing, we don't seem to be getting any better here. And you might say, well, we actually have made progress as a people. I don't know. Not the things that really matter.

When I've got an iPhone, that's really lovely. But not the stuff that really matters. When the world has known thousands and thousands of years of violence and evil. We don't seem to be improving

on that front. You just take the last hundred years, and we were supposed to have been getting our act together, you know, it's post-enlightenment. But just talking about all the mega-deaths of the last hundred years. You've got the Armenian genocide in 1915. A couple of decades later, you've got the Jewish Holocaust. A couple of decades later, you've got the killing fields of Cambodia. A couple of decades later, you've got the Rwandan genocide of the 90s. A couple of decades later, you've got the awful things happening in the Sudan. Humanity just can't seem to buck a trend. It doesn't improve. We don't get anywhere. Nothing's new. We're not improving.

Verse 11. On top of it all, this futile life that's short, that's monotonous, which we seem to experience. No project, no progress at all. On top of that all, he says, verse 11, there is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of the later things yet to be among those who come after. The preacher says, on top of all of this, your futile, monotonous life that seems to make no progress, on top of all that, no one will remember you.

I don't know the names of my great-grandparents. The grandparents, I could probably, they're all dead now, but I could probably name, oh yeah, probably like three of them. You know, 100 years, no one's going to know your name, eh? 100 years, no one will know your name. 150 years, no one will know your children's name if you have kids. Anyway, how's everyone going this morning?

Everyone's, take a short break, everyone's doing all right. Pretty good? Happy to be here? Church, eh? It's worth getting up early for this, isn't it? So after the pessimism of verses 12 to 2 to 11, it just goes downhill, to be honest. It just goes downhill from there, 12 to 18. So this last little section, it's very interesting. So it goes from kind of like this, you can see in your Bible, it's kind of, it's like laid out like a sort of a psalm-y bit, and then there's like a more of a block paragraph.

[12:19] So the preacher of Ecclesiastes, we'll get to who these people are later on. You know, I'll leave that to somebody else. He kind of reflects on this. So in this last section, in this last section, if you kind of thought there was some escape from the monotony and futility of life, he shuts down all hope here. And a bit of a testimony, he says, so life under the sun is meaningless. So what does he do? What's his strategy? Well, over this chapter and the next one, he has two strategies. One, he seeks out wisdom. And in chapter two, which is next week's sermon, he seeks out pleasure. But this one, we'll just focus on the wisdom part. So he goes, I'm going to try and become super smart. Let me read out a few selected verses here. Verse 13, and I applied my heart to seek and search out wisdom, all that's done under heaven. So that's positive. You probably think it's good, seeking out wisdom. Verse 16, I've acquired great wisdom, surpassing all whoever were over Jerusalem before me. And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. That's learning's good. So far, it's quite going in a good direction. Verse 17,

I perceived that this also was but striving after wind. Verse 18, for in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. So his strategy for dealing with the futility and monotony of life is what? Wisdom. I'm going to try and get really good at life. And what does it do?

It just makes everything worse. He studies exhaustively, but limited to what is under heaven. You notice that in verse 13. It's the same idea as under the sun. His study is limited to the physical world that he interacts with. And in the end, he's just more miserable than when he started.

And why is this? Verse 15, what is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. No matter how well he thinks about life, there are gaps. Life is crooked. He can't get it lined up. He can't reduce life to some neat system that he can get his head around.

His human wisdom cannot give him an answer to life, and it cannot add any meaning to his life.

Now, let me remind you again, what is the preacher trying to do in this first chapter here?

[14:37] He's inviting us into just some basic facts that your life, viewed through just human wisdom alone, is short. It's like vapor. It's mostly monotony. It's the same routine every day. You won't accomplish much, and you won't be remembered. And no matter how clever you are, if you try and understand the world on your own terms rather than God's, you will never, ever escape Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

And why is he doing that? We've said it already. Why is he doing that? Why is he sort of presenting this depressing perspective? Because he wants us to be disillusioned by that way of thinking.

This is written to the people of God. What does it tell us? It means that he knows that believers, people who claim to be people of faith, their minds, our minds, can slip into secularism.

Can slip into that way of thinking. Can slip into just looking at life under the sun through our own little thimble full of knowledge. And when we do that, when we try and find satisfaction in just earthly

things, he's like, do you realize what that thinking results in?

Do you realize where you'll end up? If that's the way you think, do you realize where you'll end up? Where your thinking will arrive at? Meaninglessness.

[16:05] Wariness. Despair. That's what that thinking, you let it run its course, that's where it ends up. So the preacher wants to commend a God-centered view of life.

And he will do that in the following chapters. But first, he's got to show us the horror of the alternative way of thinking. That's what chapter one is all about. Let me finish with a couple of applications here.

Really, I just have one. Practice the presence of God in your life. Practice the presence of God in your life. Lift your thoughts above what you can see just in front of you, above the immediacy of life. Lift your thoughts above ground-level thinking. It's very easy to be caught up in life under the sun, but remember, there is a God over that sun. And when we do that, that should change everything. The wind, the sea, and the sun, they're not reminders of the futility of life.

They're part of God's good creation. They reflect his glory. When we lift our thinking, history is not this unending cycle. History is a story. It's a story that God is unfolding.

[17:04] When we lift our thinking, we're no longer people who look at history in despair. No, we're people who believe that God, one day, through his son Jesus, will make all things new.

When we lift our thinking above the confines of secularism, we can be okay with the fact that no one will remember us. We'll be okay with the fact that we never made a mark. We'll be okay with the fact that we have no legacy, that we won't be remembered in the history books by future generations. We'll be okay with that because we know that Jesus knows us and our names are in the book of life. And that because of him, the emptiness of our life is undone.

That's probably the best reason to study this book. So folks, I'll say this. Pray. Repent. That's what I've been doing this week, studying this book. Repent of all forms of secularism in your thinking. That way is meaninglessness. Repent. And ask God to renew your minds. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[18:13] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.