

# Vanity

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. It's good to see you all here. In 1977, the band Kansas released one of the best progressive rock albums ever produced.

! We can have conversations about Pink Floyd later, Alan, but that's what we know is that it was one of the greatest. Carrie Livgren sang these lines in the song Dust in the Wind.

I close my eyes only for a moment, and the moment's gone. All my dreams pass before my eyes with curiosity. Dust in the wind. All they are is dust in the wind.

Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea. All we do crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see. Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind.

Now, don't hang on. Nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky. It slips away, and all your money won't another minute by. Dust in the wind.

[ 1 : 09 ] All we are is dust in the wind. Dust in the wind. Dust in the wind. As a teenager, I love this song because it voiced questions that were in my own... Yeah, that's how old I am.

It voiced questions that were in my heart. What is my life for? Will it amount to anything? If I were gone, would it make a difference?

Will anything last? What is the point? These are questions that I think it wasn't just me as a teenager long ago who asked.

But many of us ask these questions. They're common to our human existence, are they not? Some of you maybe have struggled with these questions for many years. Some of you may be wrestling deeply with them today.

Maybe some of you haven't yet gathered the courage to actually ask them and explore them. Surprisingly and wonderfully, the Bible also asks these questions.

[ 2 : 16 ] Sometimes we think of church as a place where we come as happy people who have it all together. Our lives are full and meaningful, and that's what it is. But the Bible actually gives us voices to wrestle with these deep questions.

And this leads us to our fall book series. Starting today and going through Thanksgiving, we are going to be preaching through the book of Ecclesiastes. And as we come to the book, I'm going to give you three introductory thoughts about how we're going to approach this book of Ecclesiastes. And then dive into chapter 1 and look at it where the author invites us on a journey of these question-asking things. So, perspectives.

First, we need to recognize that Ecclesiastes is different. It is a different genre. In the Bible, there are lots of different kinds of literature. There are letters.

There are histories. There are prophecies. There are proverbs. There's poetry. And each one is communicating truth, but in a different form.

[ 3 : 25 ] And often in church, we come because we expect the Bible to say, Thus saith the Lord. And give us clear instructions or clear philosophical treatises on how we ought to think and how we ought to live.

And so, we love books like Romans or Isaiah because it seems so clear what it says. Ecclesiastes is a part of wisdom literature, and it is different.

It's like sitting with your great uncle and hearing him tell stories, exploring his life and his experiences, his thoughts about where meaning came from and where he struggled.

Listening for the nuggets of wisdom and being challenged by the breadth and depth of his perspective as he's lived his many years.

So, as we come to Ecclesiastes, we're not going to get much of Thus saith the Lord, but we're going to get a lot of our great uncle sharing thoughts.

[ 4 : 32 ] So, we need to listen with a different ear to it. Secondly, we need to recognize that Ecclesiastes is complex. Again, because of its genre, it doesn't just present truth in a straightforward way in the ways we ought to.

There are various voices that seem to speak in this book. The writer... So, we're going to... We're going to call him Kohelet. That's the actual transliteration of the Hebrew word that in your Bible you'll see preacher or teacher.

He's someone who... The title refers to someone who leads a gathered assembly. And he takes on the voice, particularly in the first couple of chapters, of a son of David and a king of Israel.

He does it sometimes in the first person and sometimes in the third person. And then we'll see at the very end of the book, it seems there's another voice that comes in to evaluate it all. And so, we need to think through how do we read this book because we have these multiple voices going on. Right? And we don't know who the author is. It might have been Solomon who was king after David. But maybe it was an author who later compiled some of Solomon's thoughts and put in some of his own and compiled them together.

[ 5 : 48 ] Or maybe it was someone completely different. But speaking creatively in a Solomonic voice as a literary device. Whatever it is, what we do see is a remarkably creative mind writing with passion about life under the sun.

That is life in this world without reference to God. Life as the human condition as we know it. And we need to listen carefully to this voice. As he speaks in these different... As these different voices speak, we're going to be looking at it like a diamond. He's looking at life like a diamond. We're looking through different facets so that we can see the beauty of the whole or the fullness of the whole that he's describing. Thirdly, as we read the book of Ecclesiastes, it is maybe a lot like Esther.

It is a book that drives us to the rest of the Bible for more. Right? One of the commentators I read this week gave me this. I couldn't... I didn't write it down and then I forgot which one it is.

[ 6 : 57 ] So, I'll try to find it and give it to you later if you want to know. I didn't make this one up. But it's so helpful for... We come to church often coming for answers, right? Not questions. And this is right because God has revealed himself to us.

And we are looking in the right place for answers to deep questions. But Ecclesiastes reminds us of the importance of exploring the questions without skipping to the answers.

We need to sit with these questions and wrestle with them. Interestingly, in Ecclesiastes, there are very few references to the grand themes of the Bible, of covenant, of redemption, of the history of God's people.

But there are lots of hints along the way that there is more to life than life under the sun. And as we read it, I believe the author wrote it so that our dissatisfaction would look beyond life under the sun for something more.

So, with that introduction, let's take a dive into Ecclesiastes chapter 1. And I'm going to pray and ask for God's help, and then we'll look at it together.

[ 8 : 12 ] Please pray with me. Oh, Lord, we thank you for your word in all of its grandeur and diversity and wonder. And, Lord, we thank you for this book that, Lord, speaks the questions of our hearts often.

And helps us to wrestle with the reality of our experience. Lord, we pray that as we read it this morning, your spirit would help us. That we would have clarity of understanding.

Lord, that you would help us to receive this word. Lord, to be led by it into the questions and the wrestling that the author leads us into. And, Lord, we pray that at the end, we would find you in the midst of it.

Lord, I pray for your help this morning as I speak. Give me clarity. Give me help. So that I might speak the words that I ought to. And so that we together might sit under the authority of your word this morning.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Ecclesiastes chapter 1. If you want to follow along in the Pew Bible, it will be on page 518.

[ 9 : 24 ] It will also be up on the screen as we read this. Ecclesiastes, what we're going to do is walk through it in two sections. So we're going to look at verses 1 through 11. And then we're going to look at verses 12 through 18.

Ecclesiastes chapter 1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation comes and a generation goes, 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 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. All things are full of weariness.

[10:28] 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 later things yet to be among those who come after. In these verses, the author is communicating that life under the sun leaves us grasping for meaning and permanence.

The whole book is introduced in verse 1 by framing the author. He is introducing himself briefly. And as the king in Jerusalem, as the son of David, you expect him to be speaking for God and pronouncing something wonderful and glorious and tremendous.

And what does he do in verse 2? He says, vanity of vanities. All is vanity. He repeats it so many times.

[11:42] Now, what does this word mean? This is the old King James word that is used. Vanity in... And we might think of vain being sort of someone who's self-centered and egotistical, but that's not actually the meaning here.

There are a couple of shades. This word is notoriously difficult to translate into one English word. It has... It's been translated meaningless. It's been translated futile.

It's been translated fleeting. It technically refers to a vapor or a breath or a mist. And it's clearly used in many places in the Bible metaphorically.

So, it's something that's insubstantial without weight or without meaning. Right? And he says, all of life is like this.

It's like hugging a specter. It's like standing on a cloud. God, we... We don't find that there's anything there in life under the sun.

[12:42] And this is the theme of the book. It's going to be a fun couple of weeks this fall, isn't it? As we read this. This is the theme of the book. As he explores life under the sun in so many different ways.

He's going to... Then he says, let's explore... Let's ask the question that we need to be answering as we're exploring this.

Right? Verse 3 again. What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? And by the name of the man... What do you add?

What's the profit here? He's not just saying like, are we sustaining something? But what's the good, the value added in this? Does anything under the sun have meaning?

Is it going to make a difference? And again, this phrase, under the sun, is so important. Because it means that he's describing the normal Christian life... Or the normal human life, excuse me, the normal human life as we look at life on this earth without reference to God.

[13:50] And it's not that he won't ever talk about God. But life under the sun is what does it look like for us to live? And this is the life that we live in. This is the life that our neighbors live in. This is the life that we share as common human experiences.

And he asks this in some senses, I believe, as a rhetorical question. Because the expected answer is, what do we gain? Nothing. All is vanity. And he goes on to explain this in verses 4 through 11.

He gives just a series of images to say, here's some examples of this ephemerality, this insubstantialness of life. Right? So first he goes to the monotony of the earth cycles.

He says, the sun rises and it sets, and it rises and it sets, and it rises and it sets. Does it make a difference? Well, okay, so we know that it does at one level. But at another level, from his perspective, he's saying, it just goes on and on and on and nothing changes.

And similarly, the wind blows. And it blows around the earth and it keeps going. And it comes back again. And so the wind just, is it going anywhere? There's no destination. It just keeps circling the earth.

[14:59] And even though he doesn't know about the water cycle and all of its particularities, he says, have you ever noticed that the rivers constantly run to the ocean, but the ocean isn't overflowing? Somehow the water disappears and the rain falls and the rivers flow again, and it just keeps going.

With no end in sight. And he pictures these creative, these created cycles as being, though permanent and ongoing, producing of nothing.

He says in verse 8. And this is what we experience as well. We are overwhelmed by the human cycles. If we get up, we do our work, we go to bed.

We get up, we do our work, and we go to bed. And so verse 8 tells us that all things are full of weariness, so that we can't even speak of it because it so weighs down our soul.

In fact, all the things that we look at that might delight our eye don't satisfy. And all the things we hear that might give us joy don't ever fill us up.

[16:05] And then in verses 9 through 11, he picks up this phrase that has entered into our common parlance, doesn't it? There is nothing new under the sun.

How depressing is this? Right? There is nothing new. If you've seen it, it's happened before. If you think something's new going to happen, don't count on it.

It's already been. It's an interesting perspective, isn't it? That challenges, I would say, in particular, our modern spirit.

Because we are so committed to progressive idealism in this world, isn't it? We're going to make a difference. We're going to change the world. We're going to live a life that's going to be so significant that people will remember us.

This is what it's going to mean to live a good life. This is what we seek to gain by what we do. Nick and I were talking about this week, and he asked the question, how many of you know who your great-great-grandfather was?

[17:14] Yeah, like five of you. Because you're genealogically literate people. But like most of us, we don't know. And you just have to go back a few more generations, and it disappears, right?

It might be a name on a page, but for most of us, it just disappears. And friends, that's 100, 200 years. Go back 1,000 years. This is what Percy Shelley wrote in his great poem, Ozymandias.

And I'm going to read it to you because it just captures what the writer here is saying so well. This was written, by the way, about the pharaohs in Egypt, about Ramses II, as a matter of fact.

So he said this. He said, I met a traveler from an antique land who said, Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies, Whose frown and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command Tell that its sculptor well those passions read. Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things, The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed, And on the pedestal, these words appear.

[18:29] My name is Ozymandias, King of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, Boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Even your own poets know that life under the sun is vanity, And our life is but a vapor.

So this is the opening salvo of the writer. And then we move on to a more personal exploration in verses 12 through 18. So let's read that together if you want to look with me.

He writes, I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem, And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom All that is done under heaven.

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of men to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, And behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

[19:44] What is crooked cannot be made straight, And what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, Surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.

And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom, And to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after the wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. This ends the reading of the Word of God.

Let's pray. No, I'm kidding. In this second section, The writer expresses his own personal search for meaning under the sun.

And it leaves us still with this empty feeling, does it not? Notice the voice changes. The preacher in verse 2 is a third person.

[ 20 : 47 ] He's being quoted. Here we see in verse 12, The first person, he says, I did this. I applied my heart. I applied my heart. And heart was not just his emotional faculties, But all of his being.

I spent my whole life searching out life under the sun To see if in the wisdom and knowledge of that, I would find anything meaningful. And his conclusion, It is an unhappy business that God has left us.

Life under the sun is hard. Verse 15 reminds us That the experience of our lives is filled with overwhelming futility.

There are crooked things, And they're never straightened. Right? There are futile things, And they continue to pile up so much that they're uncounted. We can't even account for them all.

In verses 16 through 18, He continues, He doesn't only search out wisdom and knowledge. He says, Well, if I haven't found it there, Maybe I'll look at madness and folly.

[ 21 : 56 ] Because maybe I'll find meaning there. And this is where it's interesting. Because if this is in a Solomonic voice, Whether it's Solomon or not, Solomon pursued everything under the sun.

If you look at his history, He was the richest man in the world. He had every pleasure, Every wealth, Every privilege, Every possibility. In his exploration to go as far as he could, He was extremely successful.

And yet his final evaluation, Vanity, Meaningless, Empty. In fact, Wisdom, Wisdom, As we see in verse 18, Just brings vexation.

And knowledge increases sorrow. Because we don't get what we, What our hearts long for. Because we know we were meant for meaning and purpose.

And yet we can't find it under the sun. I saw this interview earlier this year, And I wanted to quote it from you. Anyone a golf fan here?

[ 23 : 06 ] Scotty Scheffler is the number one golfer in the world. He has been so for over 150 weeks. So that's three years. So if you don't know him, Hey, He's like, He's the Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods of today in golf.

He's really outstanding. But in an interview recently, He said this, Is it great to be able to win tournaments And to accomplish things I have in the game of golf?

Yeah, It brings tears to my eyes. Just to think about. Because I've literally worked my entire life To be good at this sport. I have that kind of sense of accomplishment.

I think it's a pretty cool feeling. But he goes on and says, This is not a fulfilling life. It's fulfilling from the sense of accomplishment, But it's not fulfilling from a sense of the deepest part of your heart. There are a lot of people That make it To what they thought was going to fulfill them in life. And you get there, You get to number one in the world. And they're like, What's the point?

[ 24 : 13 ] Now it turns out, He's a professing Christian. He participates in Bible studies on the PGA Tour. So he's not speaking this out of despair. But as one who has achieved The highest pinnacle Of his life ambition.

He said, It's not enough. It doesn't give us What we want it to give us. Maybe some of you Have felt that.

Maybe some of this Rings true to you. Maybe it's career aspirations. Maybe it's A relationship And a marriage.

Maybe it's A certain Accomplishment That you have set your heart on. And you've actually succeeded. And you wonder why it feels so hollow. Many of us set our hearts on things And don't get there And live with the disappointment That we never got a chance To test this out.

And so we've lived in disappointment And falling short Rather than success. But the writer of Ecclesiastes Would say to us It's all vanity Meaningless Grasping at the wind If we think That those things That we are pursuing Can give us The heart's desire.

[ 25 : 38 ] And we're going to explore this In the coming weeks. Because what the writer of Ecclesiastes Does is he says Let's look at this. Let's look at this. Let's look at this. Let's look at work. Let's look at pleasure.

Let's look at wisdom. Let's look at doing good. Let's look at justice. And all of these things Under the sun. We'll explore it together.

And we'll see what he has to say. So what are we to learn From Ecclesiastes Chapter 1 This morning. First We need to be Challenged to not be naive About the world we live in. Again I mentioned this At the beginning But our Our church culture Can be One where we think We've got to all be Happy happy And have it all together And know where we are And And And I think that There's a place In our church life To recognize That life is hard And it is often fruitless In the ways that we want it to be So our church culture Needs to be challenged Not to be naive But our broader culture Does too Because we live in a time Of irrepressible humanism Even though the world Seems dark We keep saying We can do this If just we band together If only we could get Our right values If only we could get The right political leaders If only we could just If we could do it right We're going to make The best of all possible worlds And that is the hope That sustains Our culture Here in the West Our human utopian

Utopian dreams And visions Are shattered By the Ecclesiastes Analysis of life Under the sun It's not going to Get us there And given that Then the second thing We're going to get From chapter 1 Is a word of comfort Because Deep down We know this We've experienced this And if you haven't yet I'm sorry to say it You will You will find That life Will not give you It cannot bear the weight It is insubstantial To give you The meaning And purpose And life That you Were actually made for The world is really Hard to live in And it's nice to know That God knows that too And that his word Reveals this to us So that we can see that It is a miserable business To live in this life

[ 28 : 19 ] But finally I think that it Awakens in us A thirst for something more I remember one of my Seminary professors Saying that Apart from the gospel Nihilism is the most Honest Philosophy In the whole world And I think the Ecclesiastes writer Would say Yep There you go Meaningless Meaningless It's maybe not nihilism And there are a couple of more You know Creative versions Of how you deal with this Absurdity of life And meaninglessness But But it feels like There's There's not a good alternative And if we reject that nihilism As being despair And destruction And darkness Then we need to look For something more And there are hints of it Even in this passage Recall That when he says The writer says I was king in Jerusalem Jerusalem is a place

That has meaning In the Bible It is the place Where God Dwelt among men In a particular way In the Old Testament history Right It is the place Where It is It is the image That then takes up In a biblical theme It is the place Where God's people Will gather And worship God And so the writer Reminds us of this To remind us He has not abandoned God Even though He sees that life Under the sun Is meaningless The second thing Is you see His heart's desire In his search Because there is Something more We grasp Because we were meant To find We ask Because there is An answer We look Because there is Something to see As C.S. Lewis In The Weight of Glory Wrote We have hunger Because there is Such a thing As food And we were meant To have it So the writer Does not despair Though it may be

Vanity under the sun Under God There is more to it And this is where My third point In my introduction About what the Bible Does to us It pushes us To the rest Of the scripture To the rest Of the Bible To give some Perspective And so I am Going to read A passage From Romans Chapter 8 Because it talks About the vanity Of life Under the sun So it will be Up on the screen Romans 8 Verses 18 Through 25 This is what The apostle Paul Writes Regarding vanity For I consider The sufferings Of this present Time Are not worth Comparing With the glory That is to be Revealed to us For the creation Waits with eager Longing And the revealing Of the sons Of God For the creation Was subject To futility There it is That's the same word Translated in Greek That was in Ecclesiastes 1 2 The creation

Was subject To futility Not willingly But because of Him who suggested It in hope That the creation Itself will be Set free From its bondage To corruption And obtain The freedom Of the glory Of the children Of God For we know That the whole Creation Has been groaning Together in the Pains of childbirth Until now And not only The creation But we ourselves Who have the First fruits of the Spirit grown inwardly As we wait eagerly For adoption As sons The redemption Of our bodies For in this hope We are saved Now hope That is seen Is not hope For who hopes For what he sees But if we hope For what we do not see We wait for it With patience Do you see How Paul Captures The heart Of the The writer Of Ecclesiastes Suffering Is in the present time We wait with Eagerness And longing For something more We groan For something better And he says

There is a purpose Under God For the vanity That we experience God has subjected The world After the fall Of Adam To futility So that We might also Experience God's power Of redemption And a glorious Eternity As the children Of God In a world That will be Redeemed Along with God's

people At the end Of the age There is more Than life Under the sun God has spoken And God Has worked By sending Jesus To be That redeemer To achieve That redemption Through his life And death And resurrection He broke Into the futility And meaninglessness And emptiness Of life And he said I am here To show you The kingdom

[ 33 : 26 ] Of God Which has more Substance More meaning Than you can Even imagine And like C.S. Lewis In The Great Divorce He points us To something Whose reality Is so glorious And so great It's overwhelming To us Who haven't yet Experienced it But Jesus came To be a redeemer So that our lives Are not empty And meaningless Because we can Live life In the sun Of God Rather than Under the sun Without God And this is what The writer of Ecclesiastes Calls us to look at As we go We have been In Jesus And will be Freed From the vanity Of life Apart from God Let's pray Lord we thank you

This morning For this word We pray that you Will help us Lord for those of us Who are wrestling And struggling Will you Lord Plant With deep roots This word of hope Into our hearts For those of us Who are fearful To ask these questions Give us courage To plumb the depths Of them And to find That at the bottom You are there And Lord For those who are Despairing Lord Will you remind them That there is something More Than life under the sun We pray this In Jesus name Amen