

When Everything Feels Empty

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

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June 22-23, 2024

A *Peanuts* comic shows Linus working diligently on the beach, constructing a large and elaborate sandcastle. A few frames later, it begins to rain, eventually pouring down so heavily that his castle is completely washed out. Linus remarks, *“There’s a lesson to be learned here somewhere, but I don’t know what it is...”*

The life lesson here is that apart from a saving relationship with Christ, life is fragile, fleeting, and futile. Ted Olson puts it bluntly: *“You are going to die. And no one is going to remember you. The stuff you’re working hard on is going to be completely undone, as if it were never there.”*

We’re kicking off a new series this weekend from the Book of Ecclesiastes called, “Searching for Significance.” Ecclesiastes has been called the most contemporary book of the Bible, but it is often overlooked, perhaps because parts of it are confusing. It stirs up some raw and gritty questions but also gives some real and relevant answers.

Here are some reasons I’m drawn to Solomon’s diary of despair.

1. People are searching for meaning and purpose today. According to a study from *Lifeway Research*, 42% of Americans wonder how to find more meaning and purpose in life at least weekly. Over 20% consider this every day. This study will help equip us to live on mission among people who are searching for meaning.

2. The book addresses and answers the biggest and hardest questions of life. Ecclesiastes surprises people because it’s so honest about life’s troubles and difficulties. One commentator captures the essence of Ecclesiastes this way: *“As an essay in apologetics, it defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”*

- Origin: *Where did I come from?*
- Identity: *Who am I?*
- Meaning: *Why am I here?*
- Morality: *How should I live?*
- Destiny: *Where am I headed after I die?*

3. Ecclesiastes speaks to all generations. It was Mark Twain who said, “*Life would be a whole lot better if we could be born at age 80 and then gradually approach age 18.*” As an Old Testament Second Winder, Solomon shares wisdom with the next generation by exhorting young people in 11:9: “***Rejoice, O young man in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth...but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.***”

Solomon, the wisest man around, was led astray into idol worship by his many wives who served other gods. God confronted and chastised him for his unfaithfulness and Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes as a way to warn others about making the same mistakes.

Young person, you are in the process of becoming what you will be one day. The decisions you make and the habits you develop today will shape who you become tomorrow. Who do you want to be when you grow up? You will be that person much sooner than you think. What are you doing to become that person right now?

Some time ago I read a post entitled, “How to Ruin Your Life in your Twenties.” I’ve referenced it before, but it bears repeating.

- Do whatever you want.
- Live beyond your means.
- Feed an addiction.
- Run with fools.
- Believe your life is about you.
- Live for immediate gratification.
- Avoid accountability.

Solomon still speaks today. You can almost hear his reverberating regret in Ecclesiastes 12:1: “***Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’***”

Solomon also speaks to senior saints in 12:3-8 as he describes how our teeth fall out, our backs begin to bend, our eyesight fades, and we get up before the birds. This week we received a prayer letter from our Go Team partner George King. George is our longest serving missionary, being sent out from Edgewood over 60

years ago. Listen to what he writes: *“In Ecclesiastes 12:3, we read about aging, ‘In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble (my legs are shaky), and the strong men shall bow themselves (yes, at 91 the body is weakening), and the grinders cease because they are few (I still have 29 of my teeth), and those that look out of the windows be darkened (though I have a hard time reading, I passed eye tests to drive without glasses!).’ I never expected to get this old but thank my Lord for each day that I have been allowed to preach the Gospel.”*

4. We won’t find satisfaction until we experience salvation. Solomon experimented with all the things people still pursue today as they look for purpose in power, possessions, popularity, prestige, and pleasure. It’s true what G.K. Chesterton said, *“When men stop believing in God, it isn’t that they then believe in nothing: they believe in everything.”* Ecclesiastes will help us see that life is empty if lived apart from God. The descriptions of dissatisfaction are described in vivid ways.

5. The book is filled with bad news about our sin and good news about salvation. One pastor believes Ecclesiastes is one of the most evangelistic books in the entire Bible. Over the past couple months, I’ve noticed a sweet married couple at Vibrant Coffeehouse when I’m working on my sermons. They always bring in a newspaper and read it while drinking their coffees. As a way to build a bridge to them, I’ve been asking them if they ever find any good news in the paper. This past week, the wife frowned and said, *“No, there’s never any good news in here!”* To which I said, *“The Bible has a lot of good news in it.”* She replied, *“I’m not so sure about that.”* I smiled and said, *“Well, there is bad news in the Bible because we’re sinners, but there’s a lot of good news, especially at the end of the book.”*

She seemed intrigued so I gave her a copy of the *Soul Satisfaction* pamphlet I keep in my wallet, which is based on the message of Ecclesiastes. BTW, there are copies of this tract at the Welcome Center today. In return, she gave me their newspaper when they were finished with it. Sure enough, it was filled with bad news.

Ecclesiastes will edify our own souls, and it will energize us to evangelize those who need Jesus. If you wonder whether to invite your unbelieving neighbor, friend, co-worker or classmate to church because you’re not sure if they will be able to relate to the topic being preached, you can rest assured that every message in this series will speak to them even as it challenges those of us who are followers of Christ.

Earlier this week, an Edgewood member asked for an outline of the series so she can read the Scripture passage ahead of time. After I sent it to her, she remarked, “I already read chapter one and was enlightened by the content. *Vanity. Toil. The things of the world which give me a temporary dopamine boost. This is meeting me where I am.*” Here’s where we’re headed if you’d like to read along (there are printed copies available at the Welcome Center and South Entrance).

June 22-23	When Everything Feels Empty	1:1-2
June 29-30	The Cycle of Life	1:3-11
July 13-14	The Wise and the Weary	1:12-18
July 20-21	The Search for Satisfaction	2:1-17
July 27-28	You Can’t Take it With You	2:18-24
Aug 3-4	A Time for Everything	3:1-8
Aug 10-11	Wired for Eternity	3:9-22
Aug 17-18	Doing Life Together	4:1-16
Aug 24-25	Keeping Your Vows	5:1-7
Sep 7-8	What Money Can’t Buy	5:8-20
Sep 14-15	Uncontrolled Appetites	6:1-12
Sep 21-22	The Futility of Life Without God	7:1-13
Oct 5-6	<i>Dr. Christopher Yuan Preaching</i>	
Oct 12-13	The School of Hard Knocks	7:14-29
Oct 19-20	The Benefits of Fearing God	8:1-17
Oct 26-27	Live Life with Joy	9:1-17
Nov 2-3	Folly is Fatal	10:1-20
Nov 9-10	Don’t Wait to Live	11:1-10
Nov 16-7	To the Young and Old	12:1-8
Nov 23-24	The Conclusion of the Matter	12:9-14

While the message seems to meander throughout the book, here’s a general outline of the chapters:

- Search (1-4).
- Sayings (5-10).
- Solution (11-12).

Today, our primary focus will be on the first two verses. Here’s our main idea:
Because life is fleeting, base your life on what will last forever.

Let's begin by looking at Ecclesiastes 1:1: ***“The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.”*** The word **“Preacher”** in Hebrew refers to a person who gathered wisdom to share with God's gathered people. The verb form of this word means, *“to assemble,”* and was used in 1 Kings 8:1 when Solomon called all the people together for the temple consecration ceremony. The Greek translation of this word is *ekklesia*, used in the New Testament for *church*. In fact, the name *Ecclesiastes* comes from the Greek word for assembly.

This book is philosophical in focus, pessimistic in emphasis, and pastoral in tone. It will be our joy for the next several months to gather together to learn from Pastor Solomon.

While some commentators question whether Solomon was the human author of the book, I think there's plenty of evidence to conclude it was him. In a sense, *only* Solomon could have written it. Solomon was known as the ultimate wise man according to 1 Kings 4:29-34. He was a wise guy who had everything and found out he had nothing.

In addition, he was the son of David and reigned as king in Jerusalem. We also know he drifted spiritually later in life which corresponds with his existential exploration described in Ecclesiastes. While I can't prove it, I believe Solomon wrote the Song of Solomon as a young man in love, he penned Proverbs in his middle age as he was developing wisdom, and he made entries in his diary called Ecclesiastes as an older man seeking to help people find their ultimate purpose in life.

Solomon was an incredibly gifted man and yet he was an enigma. His reputation is known not just in the Bible; even secular historians are impressed with his unusual wisdom. He was a man who had all the money, all the power, all the time, and all the energy to make his dreams come true. Every fantasy he had was fulfilled on the spot. He could literally have and do anything he wanted. But he was also restless. He wanted to figure out what life was all about. So, he launched out on a no-holds barred, existential safari that cost him millions of dollars and many years of his life. The Preacher was on a search for his purpose in life.

I should tell you ahead of time that the journey he took, while mind-boggling, left him deflated, depressed and disillusioned. The best word to describe how he felt is “empty.” In fact, his summary appears right at the beginning of the book in verse 2: ***“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”*** Another translation renders it this way: ***“Meaningless! Meaningless! says the***

Teacher, Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” One paraphrase captures the meaning this way: ***“Smoke, nothing but smoke. That’s what the quester says. There’s nothing to anything – it’s all smoke.”***

One translator renders it like this, *“Merest breath, merest breath. All is mere breath.”* Everything is temporary and fleeting, like a wisp of smoke. It looks like there’s something there, but when you try to grasp it, you can’t. That’s what life is like.

In this type of literature, when the same word is repeated even once, it’s for the purpose of emphasis. It’s like our exclamation point. It’s as if he was saying, *“Super empty. No substance. There’s nothing to it. Everything is blah!”* In the Hebrew it’s the little word *hevel*. I’m not a Hebrew scholar, or the son of a Hebrew scholar, so I called a friend who teaches Hebrew to get the correct pronunciation. It’s pronounced “Hev-él,” which sounds like someone clearing their throat. Let’s try it together.

The ESV translates this word as **“vanity,”** which is used 35 different times in Ecclesiastes, and is repeated five times in just this one verse. Since no one English word captures the many nuances of the Hebrew, this multipurpose metaphor has been translated in various ways:

- Vanity.
- Temporary.
- Transitory.
- Vanishing.
- Fickle.
- Meaningless.
- Senseless.
- Futile.
- Frail.
- Incomprehensible.
- Absurd.
- Useless.
- Hollow.
- Empty.
- Mist.
- Steam.
- Puff.

- Smoke.
- Vaporous.
- Breath.

Hevel is also used in Psalm 39:5 to show that life is elusive, ephemeral, and enigmatic: ***“Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [hevel]!”*** Psalm 144:4 underlines how fragile life is because we are here today and gone tomorrow: ***“Man is like a breath [hevel]; his days are like a passing shadow.”*** James 4:14 says we are a ***“mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”*** This reminds me of a bumper sticker that reads: *“Work. Eat. Sleep. Work. Eat. Sleep. Then you die.”*

Hevel is also used of idols in Deuteronomy 32:21: ***“They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols.”*** The essence of an idol is emptiness. Timothy Raymond contends that *“Ecclesiastes is essentially an ‘idol-smasher’”* where the Preacher sets up idol after idol to show how pointless, powerless, and profitless they are.

Incidentally, *hevel* is also the same word for Adam and Eve’s second son *Abel*, whose life was extinguished by Cain at an early age. Abel was born and died within the first eight verses of Genesis 4, and we see human beings dying ever since, vapor after vapor after vapor. Some die at an early age and some die at a later age, but all die.

Let’s look again at verse 2 and notice the two-fold repetition of the phrase, ***“vanity of vanities.”*** As the “Song of Songs” is the very best of all songs, the “God of gods” is the greatest and only God, the “Heaven of Heavens” refers to the highest heaven, and the “Holy of Holies” is the holiest place on earth, so Solomon uses superlatives to describe how utterly empty life is apart from God. He mentions it not once, but twice. The Hebrew phrasing is designed to express intensity or the ultimate of something. Turn over to 12:8 to see how Solomon bookends Ecclesiastes with this phrase: ***“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.”*** This word keeps getting repeated because of its importance and because we’re slow to believe it.

As we go through the book, we’ll see that Solomon described his pursuits as an empty mist. No matter how much you go after that pleasure, it will never satisfy you and you will not be able to hold on to it. 2:1 tells us it might be exciting at first, but it won’t fulfill you: ***“I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with***

pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ But behold, this also was vanity.” The same is true with trying to obtain wealth according to 5:10: ***“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.”*** Materialism is a mirage that can leave you spiritually bankrupt.

The end of verse 2 says it strongly: ***“All is vanity.”*** That word ***“all”*** means, ***“everything, the whole, entire, without exception.”*** All of life is a vapor of vapors. Every part of life suffers from this emptiness. Because of Adam and Eve’s sin, everything is tainted by a transient sense of futility and frustration. This is spelled out in 6:12: ***“For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?”***

Sandra Richter describes Solomon as a man who had it all but discovered that “having it all” nearly destroyed him. Fortunately for us, when he *“climbs the golden ladder of ultimate success and looks over the brink, he actually has the wherewithal to step back from the edge, climb back down, and tell the rest of us that there’s nothing up there.”* Solomon spoke from experience because he experimented with everything and concluded all was empty. We see this in 1:14: ***“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”***

Freddie Mercury, former lead singer for Queen, died shortly after he wrote these lyrics to his final song: *“Does anybody know what we’re living for?”* Tennis champion Boris Becker, who won three Wimbledon titles once said, *“I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything...and I had no inner peace.”* I’m told a baseball player who made it into the Hall of Fame said this: *“I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top...there’s nothing there.”* William Shakespeare offered these words: *“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more; it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”* They could have all learned this from Ecclesiastes.

Let me clarify something. When Solomon wanted to experiment with the different things that life had to offer, there was nothing to hold him back. As king, no one could question him. As one of the richest individuals in the world, money was not a problem. He was convinced that he could find something that would ultimately satisfy him, if he just looked hard enough.

In verse 3, the Searcher asked a question, ***“What does man gain from all his labor***

at which he toils under the sun?” The word, “gain” literally means, “*That which is left over.*” He had sucked the delight, joy, and pleasure out of everything. And now he wanted to know what would be left over, what would he have to show for himself when it was all said and done?

The phrase “***under the sun***” means, “*life without God*” and is used 29 times to show that life on the earthly level is ultimately empty. As Solomon went into the laboratory of life, he performed some experiments to see if life was truly worth living. He concluded that life without God is not worth living. Solomon’s dissatisfaction with life and his impending destiny with death led him to despair. When God is excluded, our very existence is empty.

A 2016 article in the highly regarded science magazine *New Scientist* asked several basic philosophical questions and attempted to give answers from a strictly scientific point of view. One of the questions was, “*What is the meaning of life?*”

The author begins with a bleak reality: “*The harsh answer is ‘it has none.’ Your life may feel like a big deal to you, but it’s actually a random blip of matter and energy in an uncaring and impersonal universe. When it ends, a few people will remember you for a while, but they will die too. Even if you make the history books, your contribution will soon be forgotten.*”

Friends, life *is* empty apart from a relationship with Christ. The only way to find meaning in everything under the sun is by means of God’s Son. Only He can give us purpose when everything around us and inside us feels empty. Looking for satisfaction in this life is like chasing after the wind.

The book of Ecclesiastes reveals a longing for something greater, for Someone greater. Without God as the goal of your life, your life will become vain, empty, and meaningless.

Action Steps

1. Read the entire Book of Ecclesiastes three times this summer. Martin Luther believed every believer should read “this noble little book” every day. In 12:11, Solomon concludes by saying that only Scripture can point us in the right direction: “***The words of the wise are like goads...***” A goad was a rod about 8-foot long, with a sharp point on it that was used for guiding oxen. Scripture is like a *goad* – it prods us and pokes us; we cannot get it out of our mind. Sometimes it guides us gently; other times it hits us in the gut. Verse 11 continues: “***...and like***

nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

Like a nail that is hammered deeply into a 4x4, you can hang onto Scripture and hold fast in times of danger and temptation. If you're struggling with where to read, pick up a Bible Reading plan in the lobby today. Scripture provides stability and is dependable because it is ***“given by one Shepherd.”***

2. Respond to God by revering Him. The good thing about Solomon's journal is that it doesn't end on a note of despair. After experimenting with everything he could think of, he realized that there had to be more to life. If life is only lived on the horizontal level, we *will be* empty. In his wisdom, Solomon concluded that life is also meant to be lived on the vertical level. To use Solomon's expression, nothing *under the sun* will satisfy because we have been created to live in an interactive relationship with the loving and faithful God who made the sun and sent His Son.

Solomon's bottom line is really just a simple statement recorded at the end of his diary in 12:13: ***“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”*** It can also be translated this way: *“This is what we were made for.”* None of us want to be easily upset, unstable, wiggled out, maxed out, or stressed out. Who wants to go through life being unsatisfied and unfulfilled? To be whole is only possible if we honor God for who He is and obey what He tells us to do.

In order to find fulfillment, we must fear God in a fallen and frequently frustrating world. *Because life is fleeting, base your life on what will last forever.*

In his book, *It All Goes Back Into the Box*, John Ortberg shares a story from James Dobson about how he spent an entire summer playing Monopoly with his grandmother.

I came to understand the only way to win is to make a total commitment to acquisition. I came to understand that money and possessions, that's the way that you keep score. And by the end of that summer, I was more ruthless than my grandmother. I was ready to bend the rules, if I had to, to win that game.

Slowly, cunningly, I exposed my grandmother's vulnerability. Relentlessly, inexorably, I drove her off the board. The game does strange things to you. I can still remember. It happened at Marvin Gardens. I looked at my grandmother. She taught me how to play the game. She was an old lady by

now. She was a widow. She had raised my mom. She loved my mom. She loved me. I took everything she had. I destroyed her financially and psychologically. I watched her give her last dollar and quit in utter defeat. It was the greatest moment of my life.

And then she had one more thing to teach me when she said, “Now it all goes back in the box—all those houses and hotels, all the railroads and utility companies, all that property and all that wonderful money—now it all goes back in the box.”

I didn’t want it to go back in the box. I wanted to leave the board out, bronze it maybe, as a memorial to my ability to play the game. “No,” she said, “None of it was really yours. You got all heated up about it for a while, but it was around a long time before you sat down at the board, and it will be here after you’re gone. Players come and players go. But it all goes back in the box.”

And the game always ends. For every player, the game ends. Every day you pick up a newspaper, and you can turn to a page that describes people for whom this week the game ended. Skilled businessmen, an aging grandmother who was in a convalescent home with a brain tumor, teenage kids who think they have the whole world in front of them, and somebody drives through a stop sign. It all goes back in the box—houses and cars, titles and clothes, filled barns, bulging portfolios, even your own body.

Our lives apart from Christ are like building sandcastles on the beach. But when we build our lives on the solid foundation of Christ by putting our faith in Him, we will find our purpose. Life under the sun is futile without a relationship with the One who made the sun. Are you just living life under the sun, or are you experiencing eternal life with the Son? The purpose of life is found only in the One who resides above the sun and who sent His Son.

Friends, let’s learn from Solomon’s experience. He repented at the end of his life, but he sure wasted a number of years before he did. It’s time to repent and receive Christ. Listen to what Jesus said about Himself in [Matthew 12:42](#) after commenting on how the Queen of Sheba traveled from the ends of the earth to hear Solomon’s wisdom: “...**behold, something greater than Solomon is here.**”

Will you believe and receive Jesus before you get put in the box?

Invitation

New Members: Jack and Debbie Brintnall (10:45).