

The Cycle of Life
Ecclesiastes 1:3-18
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We've been challenged this summer to read through the entire Book of Ecclesiastes at least three times. As I've been doing so it strikes me how many of Solomon's existential experiments are reflected in popular songs from the past and even in the present. That makes sense because song lyrics often reflect love, loss, and longings. We especially see this in country music. One commentator calls them "*morose melodies*" built on the "*work hard, play hard*" motif.

I understand country music is trying to shake off the stereotype of the wallowing cowboy, singing the blues to forget his ex-girlfriend, dead dog, and broken truck. Speaking of that, what happens when you play country music backward? You get your girlfriend, your dog, and your truck back!

Solomon could have written the lyrics to some classic pop songs as well. One of the most famous is called "*Turn! Turn! Turn!*" performed by the Byrds nearly 60 years ago. The words come right from Ecclesiastes 3.

*To everything...there is a season turn, turn, turn.
And a time to every purpose under Heaven.
A time to be born, a time to die...*

As I read Solomon's search for satisfaction in Ecclesiastes 2, my mind went to the lyrics from the famous song by the Rolling Stones, "*I can't get no satisfaction...I try and I try and I try and I try...*" We'll be in this chapter next weekend.

Here's the main thing we learned in our introductory message three weeks ago: *Because life is fleeting, base your life on what will last forever.* King Solomon described his pursuits as an empty mist. He strongly states at the end of 1:2: "**All is vanity.**" The word "**all**" means, "*everything, the whole, entire, without exception.*" All of life is a vapor of vapors and 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.

We could summarize today's sermon like this: *Dissatisfaction is designed to lead us to find satisfaction in God alone.*

Please turn in your Bible to Ecclesiastes 1:3-18. In Solomon's search for satisfaction, he tried to squeeze meaning and purpose out of life by conducting three experiments. He tried, and he tried, and he tried, but he couldn't get no satisfaction.

- **The unprofitable work in front of us** (1:3).
- **The unending world around us** (1:4-11).
- **The unsatisfying wisdom within us** (1:12-18).

1. The unprofitable work around us. Join me in Ecclesiastes 1:3: ***“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”*** Is there any abiding benefit to our labor? This is a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer. The word, ***“gain”*** is a commercial term used in the context of business and literally means, *“that which is left over, a surplus.”* Solomon 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? This question is reiterated in 3:9: ***“What gain has the worker from his toil?”***

This reminds me of the earworm song sung by the Seven Dwarfs: *“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go.”* The expression “heigh-ho” was first used to convey a sense of *“yawning, sighing, weariness, and disappointment.”*

The word ***“toil”*** was often used to refer to *“hardship, labor, misery, and trouble.”* This week, Beth went out into our flower garden on a hot day and pulled weeds for a long time. When she came in the house, she saw me relaxing. I thanked her for working hard and asked, *“Where did all those weeds come from?”* Her answer was brief and biblical: *“Sin.”*

Genesis 2:15 tells us that work *is* part of God's purpose for mankind: ***“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”*** However, Genesis 3:17-19 shows that Adam's fall into sin led him to being frustrated by weeds and weariness: ***“Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you...”***

This reminds me of the Beatles' song: *“It's been a hard day's night and I've been working like a dog.”* The phrase ***“under the sun”*** means, *“down here on earth”* and refers to life without God. If life is only lived on the earthly level, it will ultimately be empty. This is stated profoundly in 4:6: ***“Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.”***

Do you ever wonder if your work is worth it? Learn from Solomon and admit that work will not, and cannot, fulfill all your needs. One pastor writes, *“What you gain from your labor depends on why you are doing it. There is a huge difference between living for your career and being sent on a mission. Your career is the answer to the question, ‘What do you do for a living?’ Your mission is the answer to the question, ‘Why did God put you here on earth?’ It’s nice to have a career; it’s far better to be on a mission for God.”*

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2. The unending world around us. Next, Solomon surveys the world around him in verse 4: ***“A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”*** People die and others are born while the world around us basically stays the same. Whether it’s Gen X, Y, or Z, as one generation passes away, the next one takes its place. Alexander McClaren writes, *“Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs.”*

To prove his point about the emptiness of exertion, Solomon lists a series of cycles the sun, wind, and water go through. According to verses 5-7, everything appears to be mundane and monotonous, repetitious and routine: ***“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.”***

To heighten the sense of sameness, Solomon repeats verbs like rises, goes, blows, and around. The sun doesn’t do anything new as it rises and sets day after day, the wind just seems to move in an endless circle, and after the floodwaters recede from River Drive, the Mississippi will flow into the Gulf of Mexico and then into the Atlantic Ocean, which doesn’t overflow. The church father Jerome put it this way: *“What is more a vanity of vanities than the fact that the earth endures, although it was made for the benefit of man, while man himself, the master of the earth, suddenly crumbles into dust?”*

Listen to these words from the song “Ol Man River” from the musical, *Showboat*.

*Ah gits weary,
An’ sick o’ tryin’*

*Ah'm tired of living
And skeered of dying
But ol' man river,
He just keeps rollin' along!*

As I read this passage, another song popped into my mind from my teenage years called *Time* by Pink Floyd.

*So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking.
Racing around to come up behind you again.
The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older,
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death.*

Ernest Hemingway borrowed verse 5 for the title of his novel *The Sun Also Rises* because he shared the same basic perspective of the meaninglessness of life. Even though many critics called Hemingway, who won the Nobel Prize and the Pulitzer prize, “*the greatest writer of his century, a man who had a zest for life and adventure as big as his genius,*” he eventually put a shotgun to his head and killed himself. Sadly, he died before discovering the purpose of life.

I'll never forget an experience three years ago after hearing that my nephew Alex had died suddenly at the age of 33 while I was on sabbatical in Virginia. I immediately jumped in my car and started my long drive to Wisconsin. After passing through Washington, D.C., I stopped at a rest area and broke into tears. As the sun was shining and the wind was blowing, people were going about their business, laughing, hurrying to the restrooms, and eating snacks. I wanted to shout out, “*Don't you know that my nephew Alex just died? How can you act like everything is the same? It felt like everything had stopped for me as I thought about the loss for my sister and brother-in-law, but the sun kept shining and the wind kept blowing and people kept doing what they do.*”

As Solomon concluded his science experiment, he found it all to be tedious in verse 8: “***All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.***” The CEV translates it this way: “***All of life is far more boring than words could ever say.***”

It was Thoreau who said, “*The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.*” Sadly, according to several studies, Gen Z (made up of teens and young adults) is the most digitally connected generation but also the most bored, the loneliest, and the most depressed. Here's one troubling finding: “*Adolescents with high social*

media use are more likely to feel lonely than adolescents with lower social media use.”

After Solomon observed a triad in the natural world (sun, wind, water), he considered three human activities (speech, seeing, hearing) to show how our words are never enough, our eyes are never satisfied, and our ears are never filled. All must be done over and over again. That’s why we binge-watch shows and want to hear more gossip, podcasts, or newscasts. Some people try to escape life’s monotony by scrolling through social media. But whatever we see and hear is never enough to fill us up. An endless procession of visual images and an unending stream of sounds will never satisfy our insatiable appetites.

Seeking to satisfy our senses will never truly satisfy. This truth is reinforced throughout the book.

- **4:8: “...and his eyes are never satisfied.”**
- **5:10: “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.”**
- **6:7: “All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.”**

When life is lived only under the sun, it looks like nothing changes and nothing is new. Plus, the longer we live, the faster the years seem to race by. Verse 9 tells us the more things change, the more they stay the same: ***“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.”*** I wonder if Yogi Berra got his famous saying from this verse, *“It’s déjà vu all over again?”* Verse 10 adds, ***“Is there a thing in which it is said, ‘See, this is new?’ It has been already in the ages before us.”***

On top of this, verse 11 tells us our memories will fail us as we forget former things: ***“There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.”*** One day, we too will be forgotten.

This was vividly illustrated last month in Chicago when city workers accidentally removed a well-known memorial honoring a cyclist who had been killed while riding his bike on Lake Shore Drive. An old bike was used to make the memorial so people would not forget the individual who died. Two years later, city workers did not recognize what it was, so they removed it. Reflecting on this, his fiancé said, *“This will be the third time we will replace the...bike memorial...with every*

new bike, we keep our commitment to remember and honor Gerardo and to fight for the safety he was denied.”

Only a handful of people are remembered for more than one generation. Let’s conduct our own experiment. Raise your hand if you know the name of your grandfather and one fact about him. Keep your hand raised if you know the name of your great-grandfather and something about his personality. Continue lifting your hand if you know the name of your great-great-grandfather and his favorite hobby. If you do know, you’ve probably subscribed to ancestry.com.

As we look at the world around us, we get a sense of futility, and as we do an inventory of our own lives, we see how fleeting and frail they are. I’m reminded of this popular saying from John Donne, *“And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”* Death does not play favorites. It takes our labors and vaporizes them. On top of that, after we die, we’ll be mostly forgotten in just a few years.

This is reinforced in Ecclesiastes 5:15-17: *“As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.”*

Next, Solomon experimented with worldly wisdom as he moved from being a secular scientist to a humanistic philosopher.

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3. The unsatisfying wisdom within us. Let’s join Solomon’s search for significance in verses 12-14: *“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in 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 man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”*

When Solomon said he *“applied”* his heart, the idea is he devoted himself wholeheartedly to this task. The word *“seek”* means he did a penetrating study by exploring and examining closely. The word *“search”* refers to a comprehensive consideration. Psalm 77:6 says, *“Then my spirit made a diligent search.”* Solomon’s search was sincere, complete, and commendable.

While his search was diligent, it wasn't delightful because he called it "***an unhappy business.***" The word "***unhappy***" means, "*miserable,*" and "***business***" refers to "*a burdensome task.*" Solomon said he was "***busy***" with this search, which means he was "*afflicted and oppressed*" by it. He concluded that it was all "***vanity and a striving after the wind.***"

Let me clarify something. James 3:13-18 says there are two types of wisdom.

- Earthly wisdom, which is disordered and demonic.
- Heavenly wisdom, which is pure and peaceable.

While Solomon was given wisdom from above to help him rule, when he searched out human wisdom, he found it to be futile and frustrating. Listen, while it's good to be educated, more education will not satisfy you, nor will it solve all of society's problems. Verse 15 tells us why this won't work: "***What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.***"

There are problems that cannot be solved or straightened out by human education or ingenuity because we are a bent and broken people. That's why really smart people do really stupid things, just ask Solomon. One commentator adds, "*The longer he looked for answers and the harder he tried to understand the meaning of life, the more frustrated he became with all of life's unanswerable questions and impenetrable enigmas.*"

In verse 16, Solomon searched inward for wisdom: "***I said in my heart...***" He concluded in verse 17 that this search "***is but a striving after wind.***" Walt Kaiser writes, "*No investigation is going to be able to make up for what is deficient and lacking from anything in this world...it boggles the mind to even begin to contemplate the deficiency.*" The evidence for human depravity is all around us.

For example, 109 people were shot in Chicago, 19 fatally, during the fourth of July weekend. This is up 27% from last year's holiday. Last week in Oakland, a flash mob of 80-100 people broke into a convenience store and stole over \$100,000 worth of goods.

Solomon concluded his experiment of seeking out human wisdom in verse 18: "***For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.***" The more we know, the more we realize we don't know, and this leads to increased pain and suffering. Having more knowledge only means we

have a bigger understanding of the problem, not that we're any closer to a solution. John Naisbitt once said, "*We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.*" The commentator Moffatt writes, "*the more you understand, the more you ache.*" Or to quote a line from a Woody Allen movie, "*I feel that life is divided into the horrible and the miserable.*"

This section ends bleakly with the word "**sorrow.**" This makes me think of the song called "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas because the lyrics seem to come from Ecclesiastes 1 and describe the inevitability of our mortality.

*I close my eyes only for a moment, and the moment's gone.
All my dreams pass before my eyes, a 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.*

You can search for satisfaction under the sun in your work, in our secular world, or in human wisdom, but you will never find it there. We could put it in an equation: Work + World + Wisdom = Worthless.

Only a relationship with Christ can make the matters of life matter. God alone brings rock-solid meaning to everything under the sun by means of His Son. Only He can fix what is bent and broken. As Augustine said, "*There is a God-shaped vacuum in every man that only Christ can fill.*"

Let's go back to the question asked in verse 10: "***Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See this is new?'***" The answer to this question is yes!

- God loves to do new things. Isaiah 43:19: "***Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?***"
- God will give us a new name. Isaiah 62:2: "***And you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.***"
- We can experience the new birth. In John 3:3 Jesus says, "***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.***"
- We can have a new heart and a new spirit according to Ezekiel 36:26: "***And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.***"

- When we are saved, we become a new creation. 2 Corinthians 5:17: ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”***
- God enfolds us into a new community called the church. Ephesians 2:15: ***“That he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.”***
- We’re given a new commandment. John 13:34: ***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”***
- God will eventually make all things new. Revelation 21:5: ***“Behold, I am making all things new.”***

The Christian life is not just the “same old, same old.” When you submit and surrender your life to the Son you will see life above the sun and your restless ears and roving eyes will be fully and finally satisfied as your senses become saturated with the glory of God. Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:9: ***“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”***

The frustrations we experience in our daily life should remind us that this life is not our final existence. We groan for glory because we were made for a better world. *Dissatisfaction is designed to lead us to find satisfaction in God alone.*

I appreciate this appeal from Philip Ryken...

All of this brings us back to the question the Preacher asked at the very beginning: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3). The answer here is “nothing.” But the question of profit or gain is still a good question. We know this because Jesus put things almost exactly the same way. “What will you gain?” he asked. Except that Jesus turned the whole question on its head. He didn’t ask what in the world we would gain for all our work. Instead, he asked what we would really gain if we had the whole world: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). If you are looking to make a profit, do not live for what this world seems to offer, but only for the everlasting gain that comes with trusting in Jesus Christ for the free gift of eternal life.

If you listen closely, can you hear Solomon's sad soundtrack playing in the background of your life? Consider another verse from the song called *Time*.

*Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day,
You fritter and waste the hours in an off-hand way.
Kicking around on a piece of ground in your hometown.
Waiting for someone or something to show you the way.*

There is someone who has shown us the way! His name is Jesus, the one who alone is ***“the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.”*** (John 14:6)

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