

Skull of Skelton with Burning Cigarette: Why Memento Mori is a Gift

Series Slide

Y'all know I love Vincent van Gogh.

This isn't the first, and won't be the last time we talk about his life and art.

I had the opportunity to go up to the Immersive van Gogh Experience in Nashville a month or 2 ago- And for as much as I have read about and studied his work- I was surprised to find a piece of his art that I was relatively unfamiliar with- in fact- i don't ever remember even seeing it.

So I bought a poster of it and hung it in my office. Here it is

Nobody really knows exactly WHY Van Gogh painted this particular piece.

But there are 2 prevailing theories.

Since the date for the painting is 1886, that would have put him in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp at that time. As a part of his regular assignments there, he would have painted a lot of the human anatomy- including the skeletal structure. So some think its poking fun at the academy. Essentially- its a joke. Its taking something heavy- and making light of it. Which- i gotta tell you- is kind of my jam.

The other theory- is that this painting is a "memento mori" That's latin for "Remember Death". A memento mori is something that you look at or think about to keep you grounded in the reality that life ends in death. From 1883-1885- just before this was painted- Vincent van Gogh had lost his father to a stroke in, and he had a number of loved ones that attempted suicide, including his close love interest. During his time at Art School- he was also in poor health and smoke and drank quite a bit.- he lived mostly on bread and coffee (to which some of you are thinking- "Yeah, me too!")

His teeth were falling out- and his doctor had warned him- he needed to "live better" or he would die early.

So- why the cigarette? Van Gogh believed that smoking- particularly a pipe- helped him creatively- and helped him relax and enjoy life.

So- put this all together- and here's what I take from this painting.

Skull of Skeleton with Burning Cigarette is reminding us of 2 things- coming from opposite directions.

First- it reminds me that if life has become too light- if it has become all about having fun or entertainment- or feeling good- remember- you have a very short amount of time to live- Is what I'm doing today still beautiful and important- once I realize that I will soon die?

In other words- Memento Mori makes the light- heavy.

On the other hand, Memento Mori makes the heavy- light.

Because *Skull of Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* also says to me, "Hey- you are going to die soon. don't let life slip away by being so serious about everything. Enjoy life. Be present. Because death is coming."

Title slide- "Skull of Skeleton with Burning Cigarette: Why Memento Mori is a Gift"- Ecclesiastes 1

These are essentially- the messages of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

Where we will spend the majority of our summer together.

Ecclesiastes is going to remind you of your death- to give weight to things you are taking too lightly...and to lighten the burden of things you are allowing to weigh you down.

Generally- we don't like to think about death. But Ecclesiastes is going to show you what Memento Mori is actually a gift.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18; 2:24-26a

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 "Absolute futility," says the Teacher.

"Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

3 What does a person gain for all his efforts

that he labors at under the sun?

4 A generation goes and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets;
panting, it hurries back to the place
where it rises.

6 Gusting to the south,
turning to the north,
turning, turning, goes the wind,
and the wind returns in its cycles.

7 All the streams flow to the sea,
yet the sea is never full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.

8 All things are wearisome,
more than anyone can say.

The eye is not satisfied by seeing
or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Can one say about anything,
“Look, this is new”?

It has already existed in the ages before us.

11 There is no remembrance of those who came before;

and of those who will come after
there will also be no remembrance
by those who follow them.

12 I, the Teacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I applied my mind to examine and explore through wisdom all that is done under heaven. God has given people this miserable task to keep them occupied. 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and have found everything to be futile, a pursuit of the wind.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, “See, I have amassed wisdom far beyond all those who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has thoroughly grasped wisdom and knowledge.” 17 I applied my mind to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly; I learned that this too is a pursuit of the wind.

18 For with much wisdom is much sorrow;
as knowledge increases, grief increases.

24 There is nothing better for a person than to eat, drink, and enjoy his work. I have seen that even this is from God’s hand, 25 because who can eat and who can enjoy life apart from him? 26 For to the person who is pleasing in his sight, he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy;

Transition:

- Ok, let’s start with the very first verse of this book.

- **v1**

- I know this says these are the words of the Son of David- which literally would mean Solomon. Likely- however- this is not actually Solomon- but more like someone writing pretending to have all the resources and power of Solomon. This is a philosophical experiment- wherein the writer of this book is going to talk about amassing great wealth- and pleasure- and possessions- and experiences. Only something that could be achieved by a King. So its kind of like this “teacher” is saying “Imagine what one could do if you were King- Now- I’m going to show you- its not as great as you think it is. In fact- the greatest kings die- just like you or i do. Really- they aren’t that special. Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em”
- In fact- the word here “Teacher” is the strange and seldom used title of “Qoheleth”.
- Its probably mostly understood as “leader of the assembly”- that’s why is often translated as “preacher” or “teacher”.
- By the way, the book is called “Ecclesiastes” because its the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word “Qoheleth”. Ecclesiastes means “gatherer”.
- So essentially, what you have in the word “Qoheleth” is a gatherer of people. Someone who gathers people together to listen to something.
- But rather than “teacher” or “Preacher”- it might be best understood “Philosopher”...or as Eugene Peterson puts it “the Quester” (which sounds like a Batman Villian!)
- All this guy does is raise a ton of questions- without providing many answers. That’s why he’s like a Philosopher. He’s very Socratic. He gets you to think. I read this week someone suggesting that Ecclesiastes should be the first book of the Bible- because it asks a bunch of questions that the rest of the Bible goes about answering.
- So- Ecclesiastes is not exactly a book to find answers- but it can point you to some of the right questions.
- That’s why I like to think of the Qoheleth as a Philosopher- more than a teacher. Its like after you spend some time with the Qoheleth- thats when you go looking for a teacher to help you find some answers.
- But- the 2 things I’ve settled on today- I think are a little more in the answer category. So lets dive in.

There are essentially 2 messages in various forms that happen throughout Ecclesiastes. Those are my 2 points today. Here's the first one.

1) **Life is rhythm, not novelty.**

- For many of us, life can become a cycle of chasing novelty- then getting bored- and chasing novelty...and getting bored...and on and on....until we die.
- I mean, honestly, just think about the technology we own. How many of us wake up every morning and look at our phones and say "WOW! Can you believe this mini-computer I get to carry around in my pocket that is connected to all the information in the world- and at anytime I can VIDEO CALL anybody I know and love around the WORLD! I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW LUCKY I AM!
- zero. zero people do that. But at one time- when your phone was new- when you first got a smart phone- it felt like that. The future is here!
- I remember in 7th grade I begged my mom to buy me the Sega Genesis game "Golden Axe". I told her once I got it, i would never need another video game because this was the game to end all games!!!
- Update: I'm 44 and 3 days ago I downloaded "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredders Revenge" onto my Nintendo Switch. Turns out- Golden Axe got boring.
- But its just true. We crave novelty. Something new and exciting. Something that will spice up our lives, break us out of the mundane.
- **v 2**
 - The Hebrew word that is translated as Absolute Futility is the word "Hevel"
 - It literally means- Breath or Breeze or Vapor.
 - One scholar translated it "Flatulence"- which actually is quite entertaining to go through and read Ecclesiastes inserting that everywhere you see "vanity" or futility".
 - Life is like blowing out a candle- there is smoke there- but its transient. Its passing away. And you can't really grasp it.
 - Not unlike the smoke coming off the cigarette in van Gogh's Skeleton. That is Hevel.

- **v 3**
- Now look at the Philosopher's opening question.
- What does a person gain from this life? The Answer: Nothing. How can you gain anything from a faint trail of smoke.
- And here we come up on another phrase very important to the Qoheleth.
- "Under the Sun"
- This phrase will show up over and over in this book. By it, the Qoheleth is talking about what life is like in the broken state of creation. Because God's creation is broken by sin- futility reigns. You can do the same things over and over and over- humanity keeps going through the same cycles- and nothing is getting any better.
- In fact, did you notice all the Cyclical nature- the ebb and flow, the repetition of v 4-10 of chapter 1?
- **v 5-6**
- Just look at these verses for an example.
- The sun rises and sets, but it just ends up doing the same thing again the next day. All its efforts- and it never gets anywhere
- the wind blows and blows- but when it blows south- it just blows back north again and starts over. Its not going anywhere.
- **v 8-9**
- Then he says- Humans never think "Thats it. I'm full. I have seen it all, said it all, heard it all." We never go "Golden Axe is the greatest achievement in video game history. STOP MAKING VIDEO GAMES- THERE IS NO NEED."
- No- we always long to have something new- to break the constant repetitive cycle, something to say or see or hear that will be truly new and therefore significant- but there is nothing.
- Not in broken creation. There is nothing new under the sun.
- The Qoheleth is calling us to stop pretending like we won't keep going through this cycle until we're all dead. We'll end up with a garage full of old Smart Phones and Sega Genesis games.

- Lets stop pretending that the new job, or having the kids, the marriage or landing on the the moon- will finally be the thing that makes our lives “impactful” and meaningful.
- It won’t work.
- **v 11**
- In fact- even if you could do something new and exciting- no one will even remember you. Maybe- if you really impact the world in a big way- a few people will study you for 10 minutes in a history class in a thousand years.
- **v 17-18**
- and so, the Qoheleth says- “I tried to use wisdom and madness..to break the cycle. To break through and find something new. But it fell flat. The more I experienced the broken world...the more sorrow I had. The more I came to know- the more I grieved what was lost.”

Back to 1)

- Well, guys- I hope that encouraged you! See you next week!
- I mean, “Ladies and Gentlemen- THE BIBLE!”
- Ok, let me attempt to answer the Qoheleth with the Bible.
- There is another place in Scripture that speaks of repeating cycles. But does it in a much more hopeful manner.
- If you read the creation account of Genesis 1- you’ll notice a similar cadence. You’ll also notice the prominence of the sun. Yet, in Genesis 1- before the sinful fall of humanity breaks creation- everything is fruitful. Hopeful. Remember the command to humanity- be fruitful and multiply. Which is this wonderful repetitive cycle of NEWNESS. Of life. Its- experience this wonderful garden- then go reproduce it i the world- by making more people to do the same thing over again. TO ENJOY GOD BY ENJOYING HIS CREATION.
- That’s essentially the cultural mandate of Genesis 1.
- And its the answer to the disappointment of the Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 1. Genesis 1 is light to the darkness of Ecclesiastes 1. Genesis one is the cigarette to the Skull of Ecclesiastes 1.
- It changes the perspective.

- In all of us is a longing for permanence. Especially relationally. Nobody believes true love has an expiration date. As soon as you think love can end- at that moment it ceases to be love. We long for the permanence of love.
- So when we are faced with expiration dates- like death. We buck against it. So we attempt- so we fight against that loss of permanence that death brings- by constantly chasing the new.
- Only to end up back in the same place again.
- But God has balanced the love of change- breaking the same old same old- in Human beings with the love of permanence- never wanting an expiration date.
- Change and constancy are the balancing weights on either end of the human experience. And God has given humanity the means to enjoy both of them- by patterning the world with Rhythm.
- Think about it. Every year- spring comes around- and we love the newness of Spring...AGAIN. We love the fact that spring feels NEW and that its NEW AGAIN.
- Rhythm has a way of giving of us both NEWNESS and CONSTANCY.
- When we are not satisfied with rhythm, we are always seeking to gain control of our lives by chasing NEWNESS and rejecting Constancy.
- Lets talk about this in the context of Church.
- **Performative vs. Formative.**
 - We often seek the PERFORMATIVE- the exciting- the new- the flashy- the initially attractive- and reject the FORMATIVE. Slowly embracing the hard things over time. It leaves us shallow- and with no meat on our bones. It leaves us feeling tossed about and hopeless. Like the Qoheleth in Chapter 1
 - But the rhythmic act of slow growth- being formed by the Word, but the people of God, by our experiences with God in his world over time as we pay attention to what he's doing- this actually slowly makes us into NEW PEOPLE. The slow repetitive rhythms over time bring about the NEWNESS we seek. But often- we forsake the Formative- for the quick and easy performative. We go right away for the newness- without the rhythm. Without the process. We aim for the quick fix... and we end up in HEVEL.

2) Life is gift, not gain.

- Memento Mori is so strange to us...the act of remembering that we are going to die- is the very opposite of what our society is set up to do. We avoid death. We avoid talking about it. Some folks get cosmetic surgery to stave off the look of aging. We have creams and diets and you name it...all to reverse the effects of aging...to give us the illusion that we aren't dying.
- Additionally, we use work or the amounting of possessions to try to make our lives count for something. If I can IMPACT the world enough with what I do- then I'll be immortal. People will never forget me!
- Or we think- maybe I can earn my importance through my money or power.
- Or- maybe I can forget about death if I spend my time zoning out with TV or video games or vacations- PLEASURE will stop the certainty of death from creeping in.
- And then there is a skeleton- DEATH- smoking a cigarette. No matter what pleasures or addictions we seek to drown out the distant but constant cry of death- its always there when our cigarettes burn out. When work is over. When retirement comes and there is a lack of purpose.
- When the so-called friends all leave the party that you just spent all your money on. And now you're alone. Nothing can insulate from death. Not permanently.
- Death is the one certainty that we busy ourselves trying not to think about- so we can avoid facing its reality.
- But, surprisingly, the Qoheleth uses death not to make life pointless- future death is a light God shines on the present to change it. Death can enable us to enjoy life.
- In fact- by remembering death- we can better receive life as a gift from God.
- This is the main message of Ecclesiastes- "Life in God's world is gift, not gain."
- The gift of God does not make this meaninglessness go away; it makes this vanity enjoyable.
- **v 3**
- Remember that opening question?
- What does a person GAIN for all his efforts under the sun?

- Nothing. Because life is not about mounting up a bunch of trophies to prove ourselves or make an impact.
- No. Life is about knowing God, and being known and loved by God. Its about knowing others, and being known and loved by others.
- And its in those truths- that we truly enjoy life under the sun. Even in its passing away.
- **v24-26a**
- We learn to pursue gifts for what they are in themselves- not as a means to make us happy or deep or special..but as gifts from a God that knows us and loves us.
- God's gifts become more about an awareness of God's reality and presence in the face of death. Instead of just something to keep us from thinking about death.
- They become the cigarettes in the skeletons mouth.
- Life is given to us to enjoy God. Not to forget him as we try and master and control our lives.
- If you live life open handed to receive God's gifts- you also have to live life open handed- off the steering wheel of your life.
 - Enjoyment does not come in a box with your iPhone. Its not automatically included in sex. Its not on the keyring of your dream house. It doesn't ride shotgun in your sports car.
 - God has to give us enjoyment- or the thing itself will leave us unsatisfied.
 - God is the one who gives Wisdom and Knowledge and Joy
 - WE ARE DEPENDENT CREATURES MADE FOR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR CREATOR.

3) Life "Under the Son" is the eternal fulfillment of life "Under the Sun"

We talked about the GOOD NEWS for all creation is that "Jesus, the crucified and Resurrected Son of God- is Lord."

To be Lord- it means that he is in charge.

That all things are put under Jesus feet.

And indeed- this is where true enjoyment of Life and God is found. Under the Son.
Where life merely “Under the Sun” has the taste of vapor- Hevel- with nothing to gain,.
Life under the Son of God- is forever, eternally NEW.

See when Jesus died on the cross- he was taking the curse of death on himself.

Do you ever find it strange to look at depictions of Jesus bleeding and dying on the cross?

me too.

But don't look away. Because on the cross...Jesus is taking our curse for our sin...the sin that broke the world

2 Corinthians 5:17-18

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! 18 Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Note: NEW CREATION

Back to Gen 1 Rhythm

Eternal newness. Every day

Look at the purpose- ministers of reconciled relationship- fruitful and multiply

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

2 I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

3 Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

5 Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new.” He also said, “Write, because these words are faithful and true.

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins

2 in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. 3 We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, 5 made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! 6 He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift — 9 not from works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

NOTE THE GAIN IN THE NEXT VERSE

Philippians 3:7-11

7 But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ — the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, 11 assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.