MEANINGLESS! MEANINGLESS! EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS.

Does this make you feel uncomfortable?

It should.

Like a good teacher, the Preacher here wants to get under our skin. Not by faking us out, of course. He’s serious. Everything is meaningless.

And so as good students of Scripture, we’re going to fully dive into the Preacher’s words and take them seriously.

Before you begin, consider reading through Ecclesiastes aloud as a group. Feel free to dive into the character—this isn’t a stodgy book of prayers or laws or genealogies. This is the guy on the corner with a bullhorn (although his gospel is much more difficult than the one we’re used to hearing on the street corner).

*Before each session, watch the video and read the correlating chapters of Better by Tim Chaddick. Gather your group together in a safe space. The book of Ecclesiastes is about questioning everything—be explicit that the group space is one where all questions are welcome, and encourage your group to respond with curiosity and openness. The language of Ecclesiastes is strong and may make you uncomfortable. This should not be taken lightly, nor explained away too quickly.*
EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS.

Why do these words strike us so powerfully, especially when written in the Bible?

   If this were the end of the story, how would you feel?
   Why do you think meaning is so important?

WE ALL HAVE THIS DEEP SENSE OF “OUGHNESS.”

What things “ought” to be in this world? In culture? In the church? In your life?

   Where did you pick up this sense of “oughtness”?
   Is it good? Is oughtness something we ought to feel?

IT IS AT THIS POINT WHERE WE MUST LEARN TO DOUBT.

Ecclesiastes is not a book of doubt, but it is a book that causes us to doubt. It is a book that is very certain in its worldview: that all is vanity, meaningless, a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes leaves no stone unturned in its proclamation of vanity.

All is vanity.

Everything is meaningless.

Everything we own.
Everything we want.
Everything we do.
Everything we know.
Everything we believe.
Everything we reject.
Everything we don’t understand.
Everything we don’t do.
Everything we can’t stand.
Everything we throw away.

Meanless. Utterly meaningless.
Even the wise die as fools die.
Even the strong die as the weak.
Even the faithful die as the unbeliever.
Even the young die as the old.

This seems contradictory to many other books in Scripture, and much of the teaching in the Christian life:

Do the right thing, and you will be rewarded.
Seek first the kingdom, and all this will be added unto you.
Stay within these certain lines, and you'll do fine.
In life, there's good and bad, black and white—choose good. Choose life. And you'll be fine.

Do you believe these statements?
Have you heard these ideas taught? Preached?
Do they guarantee a good life?
Does God reward the good life and punish the wicked life?
Have you known someone who you thought “wicked” and yet they seemed to thrive in life?
Have you known someone good—even devout—and yet tragedy befell them?

Perhaps you yourself have discovered that life can be contradictory—that wisdom and folly, fame and obscurity, faithfulness and faithlessness aren't all they are cracked up to be.

The Preacher says, Yes, I see it too.

Meaningless, he says. Utterly meaningless.

This dissatisfaction with life isn't solely found in Ecclesiastes.

We find it in the life of Job, who reaps nothing but tragedy for his faithfulness, whose friends try to convince him that there's meaning in his suffering.

We find it in the life of Paul, who repeats the words of the Preacher in Romans, saying that all of creation is meaningless.

We find it on the cross, when Jesus says “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Have you ever been angry at God?
Have you ever thought that following God wasn't worth it—was chasing after wind?
Have you ever wondered, "why, God?"
Have you found satisfaction in any answers?

Shawn's story in the video is about filling your life with meaning. He found it in the work, the fame, the faiths, the pleasures, until the desire for pleasure consumed everything. Shawn was chasing after wind.
Is there anything wrong with wisdom? With work? With faith? With pleasure?
What about Shawn’s view of these things made them idols?

What are the idols in your life?

What are the things that you obsess about, that you rely on to give life meaning?

What if the Preacher is right and those things are meaningless?

The Preacher tells us that everything is meaningless. The Preacher causes us to doubt that anything we can do or say or believe in or trust can have any meaning at all.

As Christians, we desire to have Scripture shape us, mold us, ask us the hard questions. As we continue in the next four sessions, give yourself permission to doubt. To question. To wonder if someone’s been selling you a bill of goods. To ask yourself if that’s really all there is.

Because you’ll only be changed if you are truly unsettled by the Preacher’s words.

*If everything is meaningless, now what?*
WE CAN SEARCH ENDLESSLY FOR THE “HOW” OF THE UNIVERSE BUT THE “WHY” CONTINUES TO ELUDE US.

The first thing the Preacher seeks out is **pleasure**.

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, til I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:1–11)

We find great joy hanging out with friends, or reading a really great book, or listening to our favorite music. Our bodies respond to chemicals with such predictable results. We get pleasure from laughter, from sex, from attention, from our senses, from cathartic experiences. We tell the stories of our lives based on moments of pleasure and pain.

But what is usually the end result of those experiences?

Is the joy lasting? What happens when the thrill is over?

When does a pursuit of joy turn into addiction?

Addicts come back.
We have to get the next hit.
Chasing after the wind becomes an obsession.

Addiction isn’t limited to the obvious things, either. We medicate the meaninglessness with drugs and sex. But that is not all.

What about food?
Shopping?
Video games?

And in all the pleasure, the Preacher says, “Also my wisdom remained with me.” The Preacher did not lose his head or his self-control. The Preacher was pursuing pleasure as it was intended to be. This was no Epicurean excess. This was full delight in all the good things of the world.

And yet he finds it meaningless.

We all have pleasures that we know have been empty, shallow, meaningless. We’ve had joy at the expense of others, or abused things, substances, and people in pursuit of our pleasure.

We know those things are meaningless.

The true disquiet of Ecclesiastes comes from letting it affect us here and now.

What are the things that bring you pleasure?
Are they good? Is the pleasure you get from them good?
What makes them feel meaningful?
What would it look like to consider those things meaningless?
What might you discover about yourself if you examined how you look at those things now?

Then the Preacher seeks out wisdom.

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! (Ecclesiastes 2:12–16)

This might hit a little close to home.

Because we can all remember a time when we thought we were wise, but in retrospect we were really foolish.

Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20.

But it’s harder to look at ourselves now and think we are wise, yet hear the words of the Preacher: Meaningless! Meaningless!
What?

Meaningless?

Now?

Paul uses language like this in his letter to the Corinthians: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27 NIV).

Often as Christians we use this to validate our wise behavior even if it looks to be foolish to the world.

But what if it’s the opposite? If we take Paul’s words literally and the Preacher at his word, then *we are foolish*—and that is how God intended it to be.

Do you remember a time when you thought you were wise, when you thought you had all the answers, but looking back now you realize you were foolish?

What makes you think now that you were foolish then?

If you’d been told back then that you were foolish, you probably wouldn’t have listened.

If someone tells you now how foolish you are, you probably wouldn’t listen either.

But hear the words of the Preacher. Are we willing to see foolishness in our lives at the moment?

What is the wisdom today that you’re trusting to provide meaning to your life?

What would it look like to consider ourselves as foolish as we were back when we thought we were wise?

What would it look like to consider your current wisdom—your belief that right now you know the *right* things—meaningless?

How would that transform your life?

Finally the Preacher considers work.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18–23)
**What do you do?**

That’s usually a question we answer with our career. After all, things we do probably include watching TV. We probably sip coffee and chat with friends. We might knit or play in a band or toss darts in a league or solve Sudoku. But what we *do* usually equates to what we do to earn money (or to hopefully earn money someday).

The problem with what we do is that everyone dies.

Death has been the great problem of philosophers for centuries. Albert Camus wrote “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

We all fear death. And we all seek ways to overcome it—by being remembered, by working toward a better future, by aligning ourselves with causes and communities that will last. We want to cheat death. We want to feel like what we do matters and will last.

Think of the language we so often use when it comes to our work:

- “I’m supposed to be a poet.”
- “She’s a gifted musician.”
- “I was meant to create.”
- “I was called to be a pastor.”

This elevates our career beyond a simple choice. It implies some force of destiny giving our life purpose and meaning. But then what happens? We either don’t become who we think we will become. Or we do but we don’t make it as far as we think we should or were meant to. Or we make it big, like the Preacher, and we find that our inheritance goes to the foolish. We aren’t even around to enjoy being remembered.

How many famous artists were unknown in their lifetime? How many famous artists found success in art but ruin in their personal lives?

It seems that once again the Preacher is right.

Meaningless, Meaningless.

Yazz’s story is that of a woman searching for meaning through work. She has two distinct life experiences. She finds meaning in music, but no success. And she finds little meaning in being a nanny, but has a steady job.

One can imagine the Preacher saying to her: Music? Meaningless! Nannying? Meaningless! (The Preacher is very consistent on this point.)
How does Yazz finally encounter meaning?
How would you describe it: Does she find it? Create it? Or something in between?

What is your current work situation like?
Do you feel called, gifted, meant to be doing what you are doing?

How would your life be transformed if you took the Preacher seriously—that it is all meaningless?

That’s a scary thought, that even our gifts and talents are meaningless.
That our callings and meant-to-bes are meaningless.
But that’s the kind of provocation we should expect from the Preacher.
Called to be king.
Anointed by God to rule.
And yet finding it vanity, a chasing after wind.

Paul echoes the Preacher’s thoughts in his first letter to the Corinthians, giving his interpretation of the end result of the Preacher’s provocations. Paul says, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels…. If I … can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge…. If I have a faith that can move mountains…. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship…. ” (1 Cor. 13):

Paul’s conclusion: “I gain nothing.”
Right? Is that Paul’s conclusion?
Of course not.
The Lover of Money Will Not Be Satisfied with Money; Nor the Lover of Wealth, with Gain. This Also is Vanity (5:10).

The Preacher, unsatisfied with just declaring everything meaningless, begins to dig deeper. He strikes at the root of our desires. He points his finger not just at the vanity of life's pursuits, but the irony with which we pursue them. Because isn't this completely counterintuitive? Wouldn't the person who wants money be satisfied with money?

I want money.
I get money.
Why wouldn't I be satisfied?

I want approval.
I get approval.
Why wouldn't I be satisfied?

I want fame.
I get famous.
Why wouldn't I be satisfied?

The problem with living to please people, living for appearances or fame or riches or money, is that there are only two options and neither of them are good.

You never get what you want and end up striving your whole life for something you can't ever have.

Or you get what you want, and your entire purpose for life disappears.

Have you ever found yourself striving after something but worried about what might happen if you actually got it?
What would you do if you had more money or more time?
What if we took the Preacher's words seriously and saw those things as meaningless, a chasing after wind?

Because it's easy to target money, approval, and fame. It's harder to target other things we strive for—like friendships, children, or even lofty selfless goals like food for the hungry or clean drinking water for the poor. But these things, too, the Preacher says, are empty. They will not satisfy, even if they are what we are striving for!

The other problem with living for a vague purpose like money, approval, fame, blessing, or any other larger goal is that we are constantly living in a non-present reality. Even when we measure some success (we get some money, some fame, some approval, some measure of change in the world), there's always more we could do.
And so we live in a constant state of unrest.

This is the opposite of what the Bible calls grace. Grace is that everything—money, approval, fame, blessing, changing the world—is a gift from God.

Grace helps us examine our motives.
Grace helps us see ourselves through someone else’s eyes.
Grace helps us live in the present moment—and accept whatever comes our way as an opportunity to be focused on others.

What things do you pursue in life?
Are they things you are actively working toward, or just dreams that get you through the day?
How might you practice grace in your life when it comes to your pursuits?

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end…. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.* (Eccl. 3:1–11, 14–15)

The Preacher says that everything has its time. He assures us that nothing can be added or taken away from God’s work.

This is beautiful poetry, but frustrating reality.

What times have you been through lately?
What time do you feel stuck in?
Let’s not forget, though, that this is the Preacher. This is a variation on his theme: *Everything is Meaningless!* This isn’t that the time to seek is meaningful, and the time to lose is meaningful. He’s saying, in essence—sometimes you lose, and sometimes you seek.

Sometimes you weep.
Sometimes you tear.
Sometimes there’s war.
Sometimes there’s hate.

What would it look like to take the Preacher seriously, that this time you are in is meaningless?

*All you can ever do is everything that everybody else has ever done, either a little different, a little better, or a little worse.*

There’s nothing new under the sun. But look out beyond the sun, and everything changes.

Under the sun—from birth to death—everything is meaningless.

When Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he was experiencing death, he was echoing the words of the Preacher.

But those weren’t his last words.
I’M A GOOD PERSON, WE SAY TO GOD. WHERE’S THE STUFF I ORDERED FROM YOU?

If we haven’t already heard it enough, the Preacher continues to break down the walls that people build to determine who is in and who is out—who’s doing real good, and who’s wasting their lives. Surely it’s the same thought that led the disciples of Jesus to question him about the meaning of things. In John 9, they ask, “Who sinned that this man became blind?” and Jesus baffles them by saying no one. In Luke 13, they ask about two horrible tragedies including a tower that fell on eighteen people and killed them, and Jesus waves away any attempt at meaning.

But the Preacher reminds us over and over again:

In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both. (Eccl. 7:15–18)

Good or bad, righteous or wicked, the Preacher reminds us once again, everything is meaningless.

What does the Preacher mean when he says, “Why should you destroy yourself?”
And when he says, “Why should you die before your time?”
Is this about what we do, or why we do what we do?
What does the Preacher seem to say about our actions and our hearts?
If God doesn’t reward good behavior, then to what can we attribute God’s blessings?
To what can we attribute God’s punishment?
What would it look like to take the Preacher seriously—that our circumstances of life are meaningless?

It’s not bad to search for answers. But when we do, is it with our fists clenched or with our hands open?

There’s nothing wrong with searching for meaning. But as the Preacher reminds us over and over again, we won’t find meaning under the sun. Everything under the sun is vanity.

So what’s not under the sun?

Several times throughout the book, the Preacher says some version of these words: A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.
As we consider the Preacher’s words and attempt to allow them to shape us, and as we consider how the themes of Ecclesiastes are found throughout the Scriptures, we might just find a peculiar resonance with these words.

Eat.
Drink.
Work.
And be satisfied.

These are the basic things that everyone must do under the sun.
These are the essentials of life, and the Preacher says—in light of the meaninglessness of life, the vanity of existence, it is given by God to every person to eat, drink, work, and be satisfied.

All of these things can be abused.
Food and drink can be consumed in excess.
Work can become an obsession.
Sex can be an addiction.
Money can be used to oppress.
Power can be used to silence others.
We can choose to use good things to hurt others or hurt ourselves.

If we know all mysteries and knowledge, Paul says, and have faith to move mountains, and have not love, we gain nothing.

The Scriptures attest to what overcomes the meaninglessness of life, to what God is and what the Kingdom of God is like, and that is love.

Do you remember the last meal you ate? Did you relish it? Celebrating all the ways that the flavors gave you pleasure?
Do you remember your last warm drink?
Do you remember working?
Do you remember loving?

All of these things are empty, but all of them, when we are free from finding meaning in them, are to be enjoyed. This is how Jesus makes us alive, fully and wonderfully alive, by freeing us from the obsessive desires that cause us to pursue wisdom, pleasure, wealth, fame, money, time, and everything under the sun.

In light of this, what are we “supposed” to be in life?
In light of this, how do we view our purpose, our meaning in life?

Thomas Merton said, “Sanctity is not a matter of being less human, but more human. This implies a greater capacity for concern, for suffering, for understanding, for sympathy, and also for humor, for appreciation of the good and beautiful things of life.”
Session 5

DEATH AND THE LAST WORD

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

Jesus’ cry echoes the theme of Ecclesiastes, but with a much more tragic context. Here we have the incarnation of God in human form crying out from where he is being put to death.

God crying out for God.
God experiencing what the Preacher has experienced, what so many of us experience: “Why, God? Why are you absent? Why have you not followed through?”

“Why is this happening to me?”

Sometimes this cry goes deeper than just “why didn’t you follow my script, Lord?” Sometimes this is a cry of deep, existential awareness that we feel alone in the universe, that no matter what we do evil still wins and terrible things happen. Injustice remains, children go hungry, and we lose those close to us to that inevitable conclusion, death.

When was the last time you lost someone?

In moments like those, do you allow yourself to wonder if there really is a point?

Do you question God?

Death is what we long to avoid. It’s why we strive after things, why we want to leave legacies and have large families and share our faith. We want to know that even after we are gone, we will not really be gone. We don’t want death to come (or if it does, the joke goes, we don’t want to be there when it happens).

We talk about eternity.
We imagine what might come after death.
But the Preacher, as always, is skeptical about such things.

“All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward?” (Eccl. 3:20–21)

Death, then, is just as meaningless as life.

From dust to dust.
Imagine for a moment that there is nothing after death, that we simply return to dust.
How does that make you feel?
  
  What would be the meaning of life, then?
  
  What do we spend our time doing at funerals?
  
  How would we get through the loss of a loved one?

But death for Jesus isn't the last word.

And according to Paul, it's not the last word for us, either.

  “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:3–4)

Jesus gave us hints about his resurrection. He told his disciples that wherever two or three would gather, he would be in their midst. He said that the Kingdom of God is among them. We see Jesus showing up on the road to Emmaus as a stranger, communing with two friends who were discussing the events of his death. Their hearts burned within them as they spoke with him! He told his disciples that when they clothe the naked, or visit those in prison, or feed the hungry, they are doing those things to Jesus himself.

After his death, we find Jesus in the unlikeliest of places.

In each other.

If we take the words of the Preacher seriously, and the words of Christ seriously, then where do we encounter meaning in life?

  Where do you think you might encounter meaning in your life this week where perhaps you hadn't encountered it before?
  
  What will make that meaningful?

Paul picks up the Preacher’s themes and ties them to Christ.

Being rich or poor, righteous or foolish, abstaining from pleasure or enjoying life, the Preacher says these are meaningless. Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Galatians.

In Christ, Paul says, there is no slave, no free.

No male, no female.

No Jew, no Greek.

He takes the major political, social, and economic identities of his time and dismisses them as no longer having power over those in Christ Jesus.

We can easily extrapolate for today that identities that are no more in Christ Jesus.

What other identities no longer hold their power over us in Christ?
What does this mean, to no longer be slave or free, male or female, Jew or Greek? For we surely still have gender, race, and political status. We still earn money, we still vote a certain way. We still strive to have money, to be righteous, to be happy and enjoy life, to discover wisdom wherever we might find it.

So what does Paul mean?

What does the Preacher mean?

WHAT DO THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST MEAN?

And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.