

The World is Not Enough Part I: Under the Sun – Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem. 'Everything is meaningless,' says the Teacher, 'completely meaningless.' (1:1 NLT).

Today we begin a new series on the Book of Ecclesiastes, a book unlike any other in the Bible. To best explain why I say that the best thing to do will be to dive straight in. We begin with the introduction, which identifies who we will be listening to as we make our way through the book: *'the words of the Teacher, King David's Son, who ruled in Jerusalem.'* The first thing to note here is that the author of Ecclesiastes is not the Teacher, but rather someone who has gathered 'the Teacher's' material together and preserved it for us. This person never identifies themselves, only speaking in their own voice twice in Ecclesiastes, here at the outset and again at the end. In between we find the wisdom of 'the Teacher,' whose identity is also something of a mystery. Traditionally, Solomon is considered the likely candidate. He was, after all, King David's Son, he ruled in Jerusalem, and he was known for his wisdom. However, this is far from certain. Many believe it could be another descendant of David, i.e., one of the kings further down the line. Others think that the Teacher took on the persona of Solomon to help illustrate his points (a common technique in ancient times). It doesn't really matter which of these identities you favor; the bottom line is that Ecclesiastes is part of the divinely inspired word of God, so whoever spoke these words doesn't matter nearly as much as the One who inspired them. What we know is that the Teacher, or Qoheleth in Hebrew, refers to a person who had taught before a gathered assembly (Ecclesiastes is a form of Ecclesia, which means gathering or assembly), and that someone, equally inspired by God, had the good sense to take notes for the sake of posterity.

And the record starts with a bang. *'Everything is meaningless,' the Teacher cries, 'completely meaningless!'* Right off the bat, we know we are in for something very different from the rest of the Bible. Meaningless is in Hebrew, *Hevel*, a word that refers to smoke, or vapor. 'Smoke, smoke, it's all smoke,' is Eugene Peterson's translation of this verse. The word picture is of someone trying to take hold of

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smoke and having it slip through their fingers. This, the Teacher says, is the nature of life's meaning: elusive, ephemeral, enigmatic, fleeting. Just when you think you've found something that makes sense of life it slips through your fingers and is gone. A drab view of things to be sure, yet, as the Teacher goes on to show, an honest one when viewed from a certain perspective. *He begins with the example of work.* Lots of people try to build a life around work. But 'What,' he asks, 'do people get for all their hard work under the sun?' Seriously, what do we get? For many of us, the words of Tennessee Ernie Ford resonate all too well: 'you load sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt.' Others may find more satisfaction from their jobs, and it is true that there can be a degree of satisfaction and dignity in work. But still, there is frustration and monotony in most jobs, and in the end, what's it all for? I mean, no one's ever said at the end of their life, 'Gee, I wish I spent more time at the office.' I recall from my days as a prosecutor a retirement party at the courthouse for a public defender who had spent 30 years on the job. The image that sticks is of him walking to his car in the parking garage with a handful of balloons, a half-eaten cake, and a thoroughly depressed look on his face, as if he were asking himself, 'Is that all there is? Now what?' Trying to find ultimate satisfaction and meaning in work is, well...Hevel. It's fleeting. It doesn't last. Whatever satisfaction one may derive from it eventually comes to an end. And as for the money you make, or, the legacy you leave, well, that won't last either, as the Teacher's next point makes clear.

'Generations come and generations go,' the Teacher says. It's the cycle of life, you're born, you live, you die. And not just you, but everyone. Everyone you know. You might think that your life and the life of those you care for make all the difference in the world, and they do, to you. But one day, you'll *all* be gone. The death rate continues to hover around 100%, and someday, as the Teacher adds at the end of our passage, no one will remember any of you. I mean, how many of you know anything about your Great-great grandparents? Do you even know their names? Yup, one day we'll all be gone and forgotten, victims of the relentless forward momentum of time, which as the old Alan Parsons Project song tells us

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keeps 'flowing like a river to the sea till it's gone forever...gone forever...gone forever.' (Man, that song always depressed me).

And if that doesn't bum you out, hey, the Teacher is just getting started! He moves on to point out the monotony in the world of nature. *'The earth never changes,'* he says. Sure, you might marvel at the natural world from time to time, but did you ever think? The sun rises, the sun sets. The wind blows south, the wind blows north. The water cycle goes round and round. All of life is just a cycle of the same old, same old. *'Everything is weary beyond description,' he cries, and we can imagine him throwing up his hands at this point in his lecture, 'no matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are never content!'*

Oh goodness yes. We chase after so many things to make us happy, do we not? But like Prince's mom, we're never satisfied. The world of advertising knows full well we are not, and preys on our longing for something to make a difference. Try this new diet, read this new book, use this new floor wax, and life will make sense! But it's always the same old song, 'I can't get no satisfaction. Though I try and I try and I try and I try...' We keep grasping for something to fill the void in our souls, and every time, though it may satisfy a moment, it proves to be smoke, vanishing from our grasp, so we chase the next thing, and find, again and again that it's all the same.

And then, to further prove how insubstantial life is, he points to *history, where, once again, we see there is nothing new under the sun.* Some may argue with me on this, pointing to the grand march of progress, but when you really get down to it, the teacher argues, nothing ever really changes. Mark Twain said that history may not necessarily repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme. Read the Bible, Charles Dickens, old newspapers, and you will quickly discover that the same issues, problems, and struggles that we face today have been faced by every generation. The only thing that ever changes is technology. We see generation after generation make the same mistakes, over and over again. We didn't start the fire, you see, it's been always burnin' since the world's been turnin'. And when we are gone it'll still go on...' For we seldom learn from history either. As the Teacher points out, we don't remember

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what happened in the past. Oh sure, maybe we do for a time, but with the passage of enough time, we soon forget and repeat the same mistakes. It's been said that 'the only thing we really learn from history is that no one ever learns anything from history,' and sadly, this is largely true (I mean, for God's sake, Fascism is in vogue again the world over!). And so, in history, as in all the Teacher's examples, it is as David Byrne of the Talking Heads tells us, 'same as it ever was, same as it ever was, same as it ever was, same as it ever was.'

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. This Teacher, he's just a cynic. He's just some guy with an extraordinarily pessimistic view of the world, and quite frankly, I have no idea how this nonsense made it into the Bible, let alone, Pastor Brent, why you would bring us all down teaching it. You might at this point be thinking of skipping the next dozen Sundays to avoid any more of this. But folks, *the Teacher is not a cynic. He is simply offering a painfully honest take on a life that is lived 'under the sun.'* That phrase, 'under the sun,' which appears twice in our passage today (v. 3 and 8) is the key to understanding Ecclesiastes. To live 'under the sun,' is, in the framework of the Teacher's teaching, to live as if the world alone, the physical world of the senses and all it has to offer, is enough. It is to live life without God, disconnected from the ground of our being. It is to live the life that modern secularism holds up as the ideal, a life that presumes, more or less, that God is dead. It is life lived *this* way, the Teacher says, that is Hevel. Smoke. Fleeting. Meaningless. Many who live this way would take umbrage at this point. They would insist their lives have meaning. They put on happy faces and fill themselves with whatever distractions, good and bad, the world has to offer. But they are deluding themselves, and deep down, in the depths of the night when all is quiet and the stark reality of their existence hits them, they know it (which is why they keep deluding themselves). Bertrand Russell, the atheist Philosopher of the 20th Century, possessed the intellectual honesty that most modern secularists lack. He wrote (and hold on; it's a mouthful): *That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations*

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of atoms [i.e., that there is no God], that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought or feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be built.' Russell echoes the Teacher. Under the sun, without God, all we have to build a life on is a 'foundation of unyielding despair' upon which the only life possible is one that never brings any honest degree of meaning or satisfaction. Life, under the sun, is nothing more than what Shakespeare put on the lips of MacBeth: 'Life is but a walking shadow/a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage/and then is no more. It is a tale told by an idiot/full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'

If this were the Teacher's thesis, Ecclesiastes would indeed be a book of despair. But it is not. It is his antithesis. His thesis, for those with strength to push through his analysis of life under the sun, is that there is also a possibility of life 'above the sun.' By this I don't refer to the life of the hereafter, though there is that, but life as it can be lived in the here and now, in tune with the ground of our being, life that rests, not on the foundation of unyielding despair, but in the reality and presence of God. If we can only find *that* life, we will find the life of dignity, meaning, value, and significance we long for as we experience life within the framework God intends

Perhaps you think you know this already, but it is important to study it, nonetheless. First of all, because most people today don't know it, and Ecclesiastes is the apologetic that our modern, secular world so desperately needs. As we study this book, you will learn things you may be able to pass on to your secular neighbors, that they may turn from the tedium of life under the sun to a purposeful life built on the firmer ground of God. And it is important because, well, even if we say we

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know all this, the world has a habit of making us forget. It's siren song calls us to seek purpose and meaning in all the wrong things; to, in the words of Johnny Lee, go 'lookin' for love in all the wrong places.' We too need the Teacher's words. And so, I hope you stick around for this tour through the brutally honest book of Ecclesiastes, a book that shows that the world is not enough, but God is. Let us pray.