

Emptiness

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Everyone is thinking... Everyone is imagining... God has granted to us the ability to see with words what is not real... yet. Even as children we can create worlds with our rooms, our toys our imaginary friends. Wise parents both cultivate and restrain this wonderful power. This faculty is one of the primary ways God intended for us to grow as children into adults who know how to handle life. We have been there before we get there.

This gift to create, to fantasize, to imagine can also become a great... struggle. From the beginning, people have struggled to separate reality from what they imagined, hoped or thought it to be. Sometimes this inspires advances and progress. Most of the time it leads to frustration and futility. We look at the world through lenses. Sometimes the lenses are good and help us see accurately. Often our lenses are incorrect, wrong, not tested, assumed, learned – but they distort our vision and distress our hearts.

These lenses are a function of your heart. They are the creations of your memory, thoughts, beliefs, wants and motivations. But we all imagine something somewhat different than the reality we live in. Just how much of a realist are you? Are you still imagining what ought to be, what you wish for, what you want to create? Are you ever the optimist? Is your world rosy? Are you often frustrated, disappointed, depressed, discouraged? Depression is such a common malady today because so many people have brought up with a hopelessly unrealistic view of what ought to be. Even Christians sometimes do not rest easy with “what is” and so the Bible is sometimes jarring.

Ecclesiastes is going to jar us. It will say what we often think but are afraid to say. It will speak of what is real, what brutally, factually simply is. It will speak in our humanity. Yes, it reflects the way life feels and how things are in and of themselves. But we do not live in an uninterpreted world. God made all that is. "Everything matters", Phil Ryken named his commentary. And it does. But it does not matter on its own. It matters in the light of the Creator. He who made all this we live in and among has given it meaning, interpreted that meaning for us and revealed that to us. He has interpreted everything in the light of End, of Eternity.

This is why the New Testament writers place the temporal, passing, empty frailty of this life over against the lasting, abiding Word of God. This is exactly what Ecclesiastes is. It is the preacher who speaks. He speaks what we experience in our humanity and often express in our futility. But it is still the Word of God. Using the world wisdom, the Bible's words about the passing mists of this life are the eternal interpretation of reality.

Who needs to hear this book?

This is for those who quickly and easily resonate with the book. When you feel yourself say, “Yes, that is exactly how I feel about...” then you need this book. The “life sucks” people need its help.

This is for those who quickly and easily recoil against the book. When you feel yourself say, “What an ugly, depressing, terrible way to see the world...” then you need this book. The “this is a wonderful life” people need its help.

This is for unbelievers who can only see life through the world wisdoms. The preacher then and now asks, “How is it working for you?” Are you afraid of death? If not, why in the world not?

This is for believers who still see life through the world wisdoms. The preacher then and now asks, "What is the end of the matter?" Are you afraid of death? If so, why in heaven's Name are you?

These sermons are preaching someone else's sermons. Ecclesiastes is sermons. The preacher is preaching these words thousands of years ago to a nation and a people. The preacher is well known and is also a king. During his reign, his nation received the fulfillment of what was promised. It reached the height of its territorial, economic and military power. He was acclaimed as the wisest man who ever was. He wrote Scripture. He wrote this Scripture. The wisest man who ever was puts on lens after lens and tells us what the world looks like through lenses. He does with biting candor and delicious irony. So, I not so much will be preaching *about* this book. I aim to preach the preaching of this book.

Why do I tell you that? Many of you are looking for the answers to the riddles, the enigmas, the paradoxes of Ecclesiastes. You have on lenses of thoughts and expectations that, well, are tragic. Ecclesiastes is not about answers. Ecclesiastes is about questions. It is about perplexity. It is meant to roll a grenade into your life and blowup many cherished notions.

But the book is not hopeless. It is not a downer. It is jarring. It will be surprising. I have a surprise for you. As one writer said, it is my hope to help you "hear the Preacher of Ecclesiastes laughing as he shows how shoulders are meant for abundance and mayhem, not the weight of the world."

Most of us have built a sand castle at a beach. Maybe it was small. Maybe it was large and elaborate. But we all know that:

It is fun...

It is for children...

It has a limited purpose...

It is temporary...

It will be washed away...

But what if you don't think about sand castles like this? What if you thought those sand castles would simply last? What if you thought the beach were heaven and the seas forever? What if you thought the sunset was sunrise, that the day is dawning not the deep, dark, dreadful night?

The Preacher (v.1)

We begin with the speaker, the preacher.

¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

His utterance

He is one who is speaking. He comes to us with words. These are his words. But they are more than his words. And because they are more than we must think carefully about what they say, what they mean and how we must respond.

He is preacher, a proclaimer. Some think that the word here translated “preacher” is actually the speaker's name. That leads us away to denying the accuracy of the rest of the statement and the authenticity of the words themselves. If the speaker hides himself and talks as though he is someone else, should we listen to the man behind the curtain?

These are the words of one who is proclaiming. This is not a dialog. This is not a discussion. This is not a round-table. But it is also not a fiat, a king's decree. This is something spoken that is meant to not only grab our attention but also to compel our response.

His relation

He is the son of a king. He is the son of a well-known king. His father was King David. He is a king himself. He is the king of Israel. Now this probably indicates that the preacher had a wider audience in mind than just his own people. After all, if he just gave his name, all his subjects would know who he is. But identifying himself in relation to his throne and his nation means we can clearly identify who he is. If this is who he claims to be then he is a very wise man.

His identity

Who is the writer? He is Solomon, the King of Israel.

Why is this important? I think that it is important because of Solomon's wisdom. For some people this makes the book a challenge. How could someone so wise be so depressing, jaded and pessimistic? If he was wise, why would he do so many foolish things just to be able to say, “I tried all that and it doesn't work nor does it satisfy.” That's a really good question...

Why did the Holy Spirit inspire this book? This book is like no other in the Bible. The sadness and grief of Lamentations is understandable given the horrible events in which it was written. Maybe the reason is not so different. Is the Holy Spirit challenging the way we tend to think about the way the world is? Could the Spirit be giving us a series reality check? That's a really good question.

The Problem (v.2-3)

The preacher speaks and is telling the truth..

² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

Think about this. Learning the difference between the pretend world and the real world can often be a confusing process. In the real shop you can't just buy whatever you want. In the real hospital people are actually in pain, and the doctors can't always make everyone better. In the real world asking forgiveness and making amends can be the hardest thing possible. Real tears take longer to dry.

This book ought to help us live in the real world. It's a book in the Bible that gets under the radar of our thinking and acts like an incendiary device to explode our make-believe games and jolt us into realizing that everything is not as clean and tidy as the "let's-pretend" world suggests... The very first thing [the preacher] wants to tell us is that "all is vanity," "vanity of vanities." If you want readers to wake up and stop pretending about what life is like, that's a pretty good way to get their attention. [Gibson]

He is speaking the truth of the world.

An assertion

Vanity - the word means, breath, or breeze. Everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke.

Preacher's portrayal of life is this: "The merest of breaths . . . the merest of breaths. Everything is a breath." He will take the rest of his book to unpack exactly what he means, but here are some ways to think about it. [Gibson]

Everything is fleeting, passing away. It is like smoke, vapor, grass.. But we oh so hope that it really, really isn't. We crave a permanence that is not here, now. The candle will go out even if we think it is an LED. The marriage will come to an end even if we think it is permanent. The church will ... You get the idea. All of this that is so real, so precious, so important, so *real* is... poof.

A question

What is the point of our work? He did not ask, "What is the point of our jobs?" No he asks, "What is the point of all our under-the-sun toil?"

This is a Genesis 3 question. Because of sin all human labor and particularly the work of a man in providing for his family would be hard, resisted toil. The words are chosen carefully. What was the work God gave has now become the laborious toil that we have earned. What is the point of anything you toil at? You work at home. You toil over your job, your home, your family. Some of you toil and labor in ministry. But if all this, and I mean all of this, is empty, smoke, fragile grass, then what is point?

Do you have an answer? Do you secretly in your heart wonder? Do you feel frustrated that you keep having to repeat things, repair things, replace things? Do you design, build, code, test, deliver only to see it put on a shelf and never used. Do you work and work and then there is regime change and it is all undone?

Do you ever just say, "I don't care anymore...?"

The Proof (v. 4-7)

The preacher reminds us that there is proof that life works like this. He points us to the endless repetition of the cycle of life...

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

⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.

⁶ 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.

⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.

Want me to show you, to demonstrate to you that this so? Want a reality check that has nothing to do with sin?

In our families...

For six thousand years, children have been born, grow up, marry, move away and have children. Those children grow up, marry, move away and have children who grow up, marry, move away and have children grow up, marry, move away and have children. This is the way things are. You would be appalled to wake up tomorrow morning and find that this is not true. But there is so much that is messed up about how we purpose, pursue and process this reality.

In the heavens...

Look up. Go outside and stare at the eastern horizon. The sun will rise there tomorrow. Now look at the western horizon. The sun will set there tonight. And in between the sun will move in the heavens above us or around behind the earth. This is the way it is. This is so fundamental, yet we are often, with our lights and alarms and technologies – we never really think about rising with the sun or going to bed when it sets. We don't live lives between sunrise and sunset. Since we have lost the wonder of it all, we no longer wonder about it at all.

In the wind...

Ah the wind. It blows. When was the last time you looked at your weather app to see which way the wind was going to blow today? Maybe you want to know how hard. But for people who lived primarily in towns and villages and farms, the presence and power and protentional of wind was of first importance. But yet it seemed to come and go with no real reason. Today from the west, yesterday from the north. Where is it from and where is it going? But oh we are so sophisticated today. We know where it comes from. We know where it is going. We have mapped the major wind currents for years. And you know what? The wind endlessly comes and goes. Like the wind, so do troubles and unexpected setbacks and much voided afflictions come and go. From where, to where, why?

In the streams...

The preacher points us to the streams. They flow down into rivers. The rivers are never satisfied and suck more water into them. The rivers run down into the lakes and oceans. But they rarely are filled. They rarely are full. It appears as though there is all this water flowing into them, yet they take more and more and more.

The Perspective (v.8-11)

What is your perspective? Does it sound like this?

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.
⁹ 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.
¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has been already in the ages before us.
¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.

You respond and react to life. You do. You have a perspective, a philosophy, a lens. Your responses are often tethered to some shocking statements.

Nothing satisfies...

What is the real problem here?

Is it in the finite world in which we live? The real problem is this is simply a finite world in which much of life, by design, simply comes and goes over and over again.

Is it in the curse that God placed on the world? Or if you don't believe in God, is the second law of thermodynamics simply an unalterable part of the laws of the universe?

I want to say to you that being finite and being fallen are the brutal realities in which we live. We can imagine and hope and scheme and legislate to create a different world but that will lead to massive futility and frustration. Just ask the socialist, the communist, the liberal who imagines that a world without limits and without reversals could actually exist. Yet, here we are. This is it. What is the problem?

Is the problem with our expectations? We expect something different than the reality we actually live. We expect our spouses to be... We expect our children to be... We expect our jobs to be... We expect our church to be... And none of them (are you listening to me?) none of them are going to be what many of you think they are or hope them to be. Sorry. That is simply so.

Is the problem with our heart talk? Do you listen to what you say to yourself all day. I dare you. One day, intentionally and consciously listen to the flow of words in your

head. How much of what runs through your heart that you hear in your head and may even say out loud really is engaging with what is real?

Is the fact that nothing satisfies a problem with the thing or is it a problem with *us*. That's a really good question...

Nothing excites...

Nothing is new, fresh, pops. Even the latest new iPhone is not... Nothing new stays new. Nothing new is really new.

Why do we live for snap-crackle-pop? Think about this: you can buy new car smell without buying a new car! What is wrong with that?

Oh, how we want a lasting legacy. Count Von Zinzendorf, a great German pietist and Moravian leader of the 1700's once wrote, "Preach the gospel. Die. Be forgotten." Rarely are the great remembered, much less the ordinary. We will all be forgotten. Think of the billions who have lived, loved and died... in total obscurity. Their deeds, even their great, good deeds lie buried. And frankly, we really don't care...

What if new heavens and new earth are simply sinless, uncursed versions of this cosmos? What if the life of heaven is simply this, but perfect and without sin? What do you think about that?

Now we are starting to move toward the End. At the End there will be a Beginning. At that beginning will be "all things new..." Really new. How does that help us then when all that is new here becomes not new now? That's a really good question...

Reflect and Respond

What does the rest of the Bible say about this?

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. (Psalm 103:15–16)

¹ "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.

² He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not. (Job 14:1–2)

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. (James 1:9–11)

²⁴ ...for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:24–25)

The fleetingness of things is not entirely due to sin but to finiteness and humanness.

Sinful thinking amplifies the futility. What is going on is not a problem. What we think about what is going on is certainly a problem.

Who should hear this book?

The lost who think this world and life and is all there is...

The believer who is living life in the wrong direction...

So let me jar you once again...

In the poetry that opens his book the Preacher is not commenting on what life is like without Christ. He is not saying this repetitive roundabout is what life is like from a secularist perspective. This is not what the world feels like from the viewpoint of existential nihilism, or postmodern navel gazing. It's just what the world is like. It's reality. It's the same for everyone, Christian or non-Christian, adherent or atheist: we each live under the sun. In fact, it's probably better to see that phrase as a temporal marker more than a spatial marker: "In Scripture, the sun is a marker of time (Gen. 1:14) and the phrase 'under the sun' . . . refers to a now rather than a there."⁸ It's a way of saying that for as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is how things are. This side of eternity, life is a breath. We do the same things over and over again in a world repeating itself over and over again, and then we die, only to be followed by our children who will do the same things in the same way and then meet the same end. Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true. (Gibson, p. Kindle Edition)

David Gibson also write, "Ecclesiastes teaches us to live life backward. It encourages us to take the one thing in the future that is certain—our death—and work backward from that point into all the details and decisions and heartaches of our lives, and to think about them from the perspective of the end. It is the destination that makes sense of the journey. If we know for sure where we are heading, then we can know for sure what we need to do before we get there. Ecclesiastes invites us to let the end sculpt our priorities and goals, our greatest ambitions and our strongest desires." (Gibson, p. Kindle Edition)

You are on a path, a road... do you know where it goes, where it will end?