

June 9, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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## INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

I begin by quoting lengthy sections from a sermon on Ecclesiastes 1:2, preached by John Chrysostom sometime in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century.

*“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*—it is always seasonable to utter this but more especially at the present time. Where are now the brilliant surroundings of your consulship? Where are the gleaming torches? Where is the dancing, and the noise of dancers’ feet, and the banquets and the festivals? Where are the garlands and the curtains of the theater? Where is the applause which greeted you in the city, where the acclamation in the hippodrome and the flatteries of spectators? They are gone—all gone: a wind has blown upon the tree shattering down all its leaves, and showing it to us quite bare, and shaken from its very root. . . .”

*“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.* For this saying ought to be continually written on our walls, and garments, in the market place, and in the house, on the streets, and on the doors and entrances, and above all on the conscience of each one, and to be a perpetual theme for meditation. And inasmuch as deceitful things, and maskings and pretense seem to many to be realities it behooves each one every day both at supper and at breakfast, and in social assemblies to say to his neighbor and to hear his neighbor say in return *vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*”

“Was I not continually telling you that wealth was a runaway? But you would not heed me. Did I not tell you that it was an unthankful servant? But you would not be persuaded. Behold actual experience has now proved that it is not only a runaway, and ungrateful servant, but also a murderous one, for it is this which has

caused you now to fear and tremble. Did I not say to you when you continually rebuked me for speaking the truth, I love you better than they do who flatter you? I who reprove you care more for you than they who pay you court? Did I not add to these words by saying that the wounds of friends were more to be relied upon than the voluntary kisses of enemies. . . .”

“And the Church which you treated as an enemy has opened her bosom and received you into it; whereas the theaters which you courted, and about which you were oftentimes indignant with me have betrayed and ruined you. And yet I never ceased saying to you ‘Why doest thou these things?’ You are exasperating the Church, and casting yourself down headlong, yet you hurried away from all my warnings. And now the hippodromes, having exhausted your wealth, have whetted the sword against you, but the Church which experienced your untimely wrath is hurrying in every direction, in her desire to pluck you out of the net.”

Now learn the context of this sermon. In A.D. 399, Eutropius was appointed to the significant position of *Consul*, closest advisor to emperor Arcadius who was ruling from Constantinople. However, he abused his authority and angered his wife Eudoxia, who hatched a plan to have him executed. Desperate to save his life, Eutropius fled to the church and clung to the altar. A mob surrounded the church demanding his delivery to execution.

Eventually, the mob dissipated, but the next day was Sunday. On the Lord’s day the church was packed with angry seekers of vengeance as well as curiosity seekers wondering what would come of the disbarred Consul. The preacher, John Chrysostom, mounted the pulpit and preached from Ecclesiastes 1:2. As the foregoing quotation indicates, the preacher applied the warning to the terrified Consul and the people alike. When he was finished, the people were broken-hearted, forgave the emperor’s official, and restored him to his position.

*“Vanity of vanities”* is not just the theme of this book. It is the theme of life. While it seems quite discouraging and very pessimistic to look at life as a passing vapor, a disappointing venture, it is an accurate assessment. Our study will remind us over and over that betting on life is a bad bet. We will be reminded often that because

life is infected with the sin principle, we are foolish to put all our eggs in that basket.

But what is our alternative? What other choice do we have? In our study, we will also be reminded throughout the rest of this year as we systematically work our way through the book, that our hope is in the Lord, who gave Himself for us. Against the dark backdrop of futility, failure, and the resulting fear is the glory of Jesus Christ, our Savior from sin and our eternal hope.

### **The Words of the Preacher (v.1).**

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem (v.1).* Who is the Preacher? He is *Qoheleth*. What kind of a name is that? Or who is that? Or what does that word mean? It is the Hebrew word behind the English word “Preacher.” The Hebrew word could actually describe a “collector or assembler of words,” or a “maker of sentences.” It can refer to an orator of almost any kind, i.e. a preacher, a teacher, a public speaker, a representative of the king.

But the root from which this Hebrew word comes speaks of an assembly of people or even a congregation. The variant form *qohelet* appears seven times in Ecclesiastes and only in this book of the Bible. It appears with the definite article in 12:8 which points to a description of the person, not the person’s name. In fact, the word *Qoheleth* is actually the title of the book, translated into English as Ecclesiastes. That word might sound familiar to those who have spent time under Bible exposition. It sound like a well known Greek word. Indeed, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qoheleth* is *ekklesia*, which is commonly translated “church” in the English New Testament. It is easy to see the similarity between *ekklesia* and Ecclesiastes. Of course *ekklesia* does not refer to a church building but to an assembly, a gathering of people in any kind of setting.

All this being true, it is easy to see how the translation *preacher* fits well in a Bible context, as well as in our context, as the *qoheleth* addresses the assembly of God’s people. In that sense, this “preacher” of Ecclesiastes will address nearly every week for the rest of this year.

But who was he? Our text reveals that the preacher is the son of David. Which one? David had many sons. It is also true that all of the

kings in Judah were born in David’s line and rightly called “the son of David,” even as Jesus was hailed as the “Son of David” (Luke 18:38). Yes, but Solomon alone was the king who was the direct son of David. Was he the preacher? Many think so.

Also, Solomon’s life fits this book to a tee. God promised to give Solomon wealth and wisdom beyond compare. When Solomon was anointed king, he prayed for God’s help. *God answered Solomon, “Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked long life, but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may govern my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like” (2 Chronicles 1:11-12).*

God kept His promise to Solomon. This book testifies to the author’s wealth and wisdom. *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. (1:13) I said in my heart, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind (1:13,14). I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity (2:1). 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 (2:4-6). 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 (2:7). I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man (2:8). So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me (2:9).*

And so traditionally scholars have concluded that Solomon wrote this book at the end of his life after living for the passing things of life and then returning to fellowship with God.

Our text also identified the author as a king in Jerusalem. What other king in Jerusalem was so wise and wealthy? Some have suggested Hezekiah. Okay, he was wise, he was wealthy, and he did expand the city of Jerusalem. And while we might doubt Solomonic authorship, here are some other ideas to consider. Solomon's name never shows up in the book. Also, the writer criticized high officials (kings) who do exactly what Solomon did. *If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them* (Ecc. 5:8). Would Solomon criticize himself?

Or there were people in ancient times who wrote things claiming to be about or from well known individuals. Did an unknown person (preacher) write a somewhat biography about Solomon and present it as though the writer is Solomon? Ancient Middle Eastern authors were not the only ones to do that. For example, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Sir Galahad* opens with these words: *My good blade carves the casques of men*. No one ever accused Tennyson of impersonating one of King Arthur's knights. So, maybe this is a story about Solomon's life written by a ghost writer.

Or maybe not. In spite of arguments to the contrary, it just seems most likely that these are the wise conclusions of the king who God blessed greatly but who wandered off into foolish sin. He has much to teach us about the wisdom of fidelity.

These are the words of the Preacher. What are his words? Ecclesiastes is "wisdom literature." Therefore, we should not read this book as though it is Law, History, Narrative, Doctrinal Epistles, or Prophecy. Those Bible genres require particular kinds of interpretation based on the nature of the writing. But the words of the Preacher in this book fall into the category of wisdom literature along with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs. As wisdom literature, the writing presents pithy statements of practical wisdom that are generally true. But at the same time, in the end, it establishes one very important, unchanging, eternal principle—we all must answer to God. And because it is wisdom literature, throughout our study we will

discover poetry, parallelisms, metaphors, similes, hyperbole, and other word pictures.

Most important is the truth that Ecclesiastes is Scripture. True, it is similar to other wisdom writings in Jewish literary history. Also true, it is similar to the "wisdom" writings of the ancient secular world. It even bears some resemblance to the philosophical musings of ancient Greek philosophers. But this book is part of the canon of Scripture. Sincere, God-fearing Jews recognized it as part of the Old Testament, wisdom, literature. God's messengers in the New Testament era recognized it as specially given from God. Church fathers gathered at the first Council of Nicaea (325) established which writings were part of Scripture.

Therefore, the value of Scripture taught in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 applies to Ecclesiastes. *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This book will help equip us for every good work.

We accept that truth by faith. But still in our human weakness there will be times when we will wonder, "Why bother to study the words?" It all seems so futile. Just the opening words (*vanity of vanities*) make us think we could spend our time better studying something more positive. Many people who have poured themselves into the study of this book have agreed. Martin Luther concluded, "This book is one of the more difficult books in all of Scripture, one which no one has ever completely mastered." (Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes," in *Luther's Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols., St. Louis: Concordia, 1972, 15:7.) Craig Bartholomew's conclusion was a bit more graphic. He said, "Ecclesiastes is a lot like an octopus: just when you think you have all the tentacles under control—that is you have understood the book—there is one waving about in the air." (Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

Okay, that is probably how we will feel on occasion in this study. But there is one very important lesson taught by the Preacher. The bulk of the writing is an honest assessment of the futility of life lived with focus on passing things. Because the principle of sin infects everything about our world, everything is winding down,

deteriorating, and passing away to be forgotten. To make the passing things the focus of life must lead to frustration.

In distinction to all that is passing is the one great truth of the eternal: *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastes 12:1).* Couple with that the truth of the ultimate end: *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).*

Life without a focus on God and eternity looks like . . .

### **All is Lost (v.2).**

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity (v.2).* This depressing statement drives us to wonder, "What is vanity?" In a word, it is loss and futility. The Hebrew word means a vapor or a breath, something that quickly passes having no substance. Worthlessness is the theme of Ecclesiastes as the word shows up 36 times (over half the 71 uses in OT) and in every chapter except 10. It is interesting (but maybe not significant) that the name of Adam's son Abel is spelled the same way (transliterated *hebel*). Was the futility, quickly passing vanity of life, illustrated in the death of Abel because of the sin principle that infected paradise?

The use of the word *hebel* (vanity) in the Old Testament seems to fall into three categories. First it is connected with the futility of worshiping false gods. The word shows up in God's promise to people He was sending into the Promised Land. He warned, "*They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation" (Deuteronomy 32:21).* Not surprisingly, after centuries of God showing patience, He questioned His sinning people just a few years before He sent them to captivity. *Thus says the LORD: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" (Jeremiah 2:5).*

A second way the word is used in the Old Testament is to express the frustrating sentiments of individuals. We can identify

with the servant of the Lord who concluded, *I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God (Isaiah 49:4).* We probably know well how David, the emotional shepherd/warrior/king felt when he wrote, *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather! (Psalm 39:5-6).*

A third identifiable grouping of the word is in the Ecclesiastes group. Vanity speaks of the inability to find satisfaction in work (2:11,19,21,23; 4:4,8; 6:2). It speaks of the natural struggle we have trying to grasp the conflict with sin/judgment, righteousness/salvation (2:15; 6:7-9; 8:10-14). Vanity speaks of shortness of life (3:19; 6:12; 11:8,10).

Ultimately, the message of Ecclesiastes deals with the final analysis of sin. The principle of sin permeates life in the fallen world. It leads to worse emptiness than we first imagine. I heard Adrian Rogers put it like this: "Sin will take you where you do not want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay."

Our culture is replete with irrefutable examples of this tragic end, this vanity. Marilyn Monroe was, at her zenith, one of the most recognized, most popular icons of the celebrity world. She was one of the first sex symbols of a sex-crazed generation that became a sex-crazed culture. She grew up in a foster home and was married the first time at age sixteen. Through sheer determination she became one of the most marketable stars in Hollywood. Her second and third marriages were to some of the most desirable men in society, but offered her no fulfillment. Throughout her short life she struggled with depression and anxiety, and finally ended the futility with an overdose of barbiturates at age thirty-six.

Elvis Presley was born in a two room, shotgun house in Tupelo, Mississippi. His parents reared him in the Assembly of God church where he soon learned how God had gifted him with unusual musical talent. At age thirteen the family moved to Memphis where they were given government housing. By 1953 Elvis broke into the music industry with his first recording and, as they say, "the rest is history."

He went on to be one of the most significant influences to change the direction of our culture—not in a good way. By the time he was thirty, Presley had the world by the tail. But as popular as he was, he found no satisfaction in the passing things of life. In 1977, at the age of 42, Presley succumbed to the effects of too many prescription drugs. The best the world had to offer was only futility.

Last week I was checking out a purchase at one of the local pharmacies. The lady at the register said, “You remind me of my all-time favorite chef.” I said, “Anthony Bourdain, right? I hear that fairly often.” Then the woman went on to talk about how tragic his suicide was. She said that when Anthony died, she wrote a tribute to his Facebook page because she loved him so much. Then she said something that is so human-like. “How could someone who has so much love from so many people become so desperate?”

To this question Solomon answered: *Vanity, all is vanity*. But why must it be like this? Why is life characterized by vanity? All of life is impacted by the sin principle. Sin is the failure to measure up to God’s standard. No part of creation fully measures up. Every aspect of the universe is deteriorating, winding down. The laws of entropy and thermodynamics are evident and active in every imaginable aspect of reality.

There is no place for us to go to escape the effects of sin. People run to the church and hope to find reprieve only to discover that there are people impacted by the futility of sin in the church. Worse is that they themselves drag their sinful tendencies, because of their sinful flesh, into church with them. Monks and nuns have tried for centuries to hide away in monasteries and cloisters, focusing on prayers and religious thoughts, only to realize that even on their best days they are dying. Satan has offered us every distraction imaginable to keep us from coming to grips with the reality that everyone on his road is destined for eternal futility.

We cannot escape vanity because life is lived by sin-prone people. The reason we cannot escape the vanity of sin is because we are sinners. The only remedy is for us to acknowledge the truth about ourselves. We pursue sinful practices because we are at war with God. We eventually discover that our Vanity Fair offers no fulfillment and we move on to another. As we age, we become more exasperated that the passing relationships, possessions, experiences

of life do not offer satisfaction. Step one is to admit the truth of Ecclesiastes: *Vanity, all is vanity*. Step two is to admit the end of the game. *For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:14)*. Step three is to abandon all hope in self or the world and embrace the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ alone.

This study should be very profitable for us as we are brought face to face with the futility of everything the world offers for fulfillment only to realize it is futile, passing, nothing but air. This study should drive us deeper and deeper into our love affair with Jesus our Savior who alone satisfies forever!