

*Ecclesiastes: Chasing Meaning*  
**Meaningless?**

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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

<sup>2</sup> *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

<sup>3</sup> *What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun?*

<sup>4</sup> *A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.*

<sup>5</sup> *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

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

<sup>8</sup> *All things are full of weariness;  
a man cannot utter it;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.*

<sup>9</sup> *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.*

<sup>10</sup> *Is there a thing of which it is said,  
“See, this is new”?*

*It has been already  
in the ages before us.*

<sup>11</sup> *There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to be  
among those who come after.*

*12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 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. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*15 What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

*16 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." 17 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.*

*18 For in much wisdom is much vexation,  
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

- Ecclesiastes I, ESV

### **Intro: What is the Meaning of Life?**

What is the meaning of life? Why are we here in this life in this world?

Throughout history, most philosophers and thinkers have answered this question with some variation of "the pursuit of happiness." It was Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, probably more than anybody else, who enshrined happiness as a central purpose of human life and a goal in itself. Most of the debate among thinkers over the years has been over what will make us happy. Aristotle believed virtue was the key to happiness, that a virtuous life was a happy life. Some have pursued happiness through education, through wealth, through pleasure, through power, or through fame.

Aristotle stands near the beginning of the quest of the philosophers for meaning and happiness. Many centuries later, British philosopher Bertrand Russell stood at what may have been the end of search of philosophers for meaning and happiness when he said:

"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 of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and 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 achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Or perhaps we should turn to another great British mind for a simpler version of this conclusion. Mick Jagger sang it, and he wrote it with Keith Richards:

*I can't get no satisfaction.*

*I can't get no satisfaction.*

*'Cause I try, and I try, and I try*

### **A. The Proclamation of the Pundit, v. 1**

What does any of this have to do with Ecclesiastes? Well, Ecclesiastes is a book that predates Aristotle by about 650 years and that predates Bertrand Russell and the Rolling Stones by almost 3,000 years, and yet it represents a wise man's reflection on his lifelong pursuit of true joy, real happiness, deep satisfaction – and it would seem he reached conclusions not all that different from Russell and the Stones.

Ecclesiastes was written by a man who is simply identified for us as “*the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem*” – In Hebrew, the word is Qoheleth, and it means someone who assembles a group, mostly for the purpose of speaking to them – thus, our English translation “the preacher.” The title Ecclesiastes is taken from the Greek word for “church,” reflecting the idea of gathering together people to hear a message. So, in a sense, what we have here is a king's sermon to his gathered audience. But it's very much unlike any sermon you're ever likely to hear in a church. It is beautiful, poetic, almost lyrical, and mostly pretty dark and depressing.

If you read the whole of Ecclesiastes, it seems clear that this preacher-king is an old man, drawing near to the end of his life, and he is faced with regrets over choices he has made, pursuits he has chased, and disappointments he has found at the end of every path of pursuit he has tried. The author is almost certainly Solomon, as no one else seems to fit the description as well as Solomon does – he was wiser and wealthier than any who were before him.

If Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived – besides Jesus, of course – then the beautiful language and deep insight of Ecclesiastes seems to bear his mark. The American novelist Thomas Wolfe said, “*For of all I have ever seen or learned, this book [Ecclesiastes] seems to me the noblest, the wisest, and the most powerful expression of man's life upon this earth – and also the highest flower of poetry, eloquence, and truth. I am not given to dogmatic judgments in the matter of literary creation, but if I had to make one, I could say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.*”

Some people think Ecclesiastes is bleak and hopeless, while others say it is simply realistic. I think it is beautifully realistic in its description of life “under the sun” as pretty bleak and hopeless – but it is not a book devoid of hope or meaning. It's a mature reflection on the reality that most of us will chase meaning down a hundred dead-end dark alleys before we ever come to the right path, and it's designed to discourage us from the fruitless pursuit of meaning and happiness in places where they simply cannot be found.

### **B. Vaporous Vanity, vv. 2-11**

The preacher starts on a bold, strong note, pronouncing his assessment of life in this world in clear, stark terms, right at the very beginning of his message:

<sup>2</sup> *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

And then the Preacher begins to unpack what he means by this verdict of vanity by asking a simple question and then giving a long and poetic answer to it:

<sup>3</sup> *What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun?*

<sup>4</sup> *A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.*

<sup>5</sup> *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.*

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

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

<sup>8</sup> *All things are full of weariness;  
a man cannot utter it;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.*

<sup>9</sup> *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.*

<sup>10</sup> *Is there a thing of which it is said,  
“See, this is new”?*

*It has been already  
in the ages before us.*

<sup>11</sup> *There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to be  
among those who come after.*

Vanity – some translations say “meaningless,” but that’s probably not a great way to understand what he’s saying. The word here is *hebel*, and it means a breath or a vapor. Psalm 144:3-4 uses this word:

*O LORD, what is man that you regard him,  
or the son of man that you think of him?  
Man is like a breath (hebel);  
his days are like a passing shadow.*

**Vapor** – life in this world and everything in this world is vapor, mere breath. It is real. You can see it. But it passes quickly and you can never really get ahold of it. You cannot grasp or control it or keep it for long.

### I. Fruitless Toil

Why is life a vapor or a breath? Because all of our work and toil is fruitless. We gain nothing real or lasting from it. Even the greatest accomplishments of people mean very little in the end – for they do not last very long and are not remembered by very many. The English poet Percy Shelley captured this well in his poem, “Ozymandius”:

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Or perhaps Kerry Livgren from Kansas wrote it even better in his hit song, which was based on Ecclesiastes: “*Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind.*”

*Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea  
All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see  
Dust in the wind  
All we are is dust in the wind  
Oh, ho, ho*

*Now, don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky  
It slips away*

*And all your money won't another minute buy  
 All we are is dust in the wind  
 Dust in the wind  
 Everything is dust in the wind  
 Everything is dust in the wind*

## **2. Endless Cycle**

The vaporous nature of life in this world can be seen even in the endless cycles of the world itself. Ernest Hemingway wrote a novel with a title based on verse 5, *The Sun Also Rises*.

The sunrises and sets and rises and sets again, as the world spins around and around. The rivers flow to the sea and yet the sea never gets full – for the water just evaporates and rains back down and runs to the rivers and then out to the sea again. In fact, around 495,000 cubic kilometers of water are cycled through the atmosphere every year.

These endless cycles feel like the rhythm of our lives, too. In fact, they are the rhythms of our lives. Waking and sleeping, working and resting, on and on.

## **3. Insatiable Weariness**

Not only do we face endless cycles, but we also live with insatiable appetites that are never satisfied and that leave us weary:

*All things are full of weariness;  
 a man cannot utter it;  
 the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
 nor the ear filled with hearing.*

Binge-watching may be a relatively recent phenomenon, brought about by streaming video services, but the principle behind this human behavior is as old as humanity itself. We are never satisfied. We desire more and more stimulation and input. It leaves us weary and deeply unsatisfied.

## **4. Nothing New**

Then comes the most famous and misunderstood lines in Ecclesiastes I –

*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.  
<sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said,  
 “See, this is new”?  
 It has been already  
 in the ages before us.*

“There is nothing new under the sun.” Of course, we live in a technological age, and we like our high-tech toys. So we might think we have invented truly “new things,” but none of it is really new. Not in

any real, meaningful sense. We may have found faster and cheaper ways of doing the things we've always done, but they're still the same old things.

### C. Wearisome Wisdom, vv. 12-18

At the beginning of his reign as king, Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom. God was pleased with this request, for rulers need wisdom to rule well. Later in his life, Solomon wrote many Proverbs, and he was world-renowned for his wisdom. In his Proverbs, he urged his son to "Get wisdom!" In fact, he said, "*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.*" – Prov. 4:7

But later in life, he reflected on what he had truly gained from all of his wisdom –

*<sup>12</sup> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*<sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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." <sup>17</sup> 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.*

*<sup>18</sup> For in much wisdom is much vexation,  
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

Solomon's great wisdom allowed him to see through the smoke-screens of pseudo-satisfaction that fool many people. His wisdom allowed him to see that what is crooked cannot be made straight. All human activity "*under the sun*" is a mere "*striving after wind.*" Wisdom helped him see this more clearly, and so it actually brought him more vexation, more sorrow.

I love to study history. You've probably heard the old saying that those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. And that's true. But I also think what I read a few years ago is true – "Those who do study history are doomed to watch other people repeat its mistakes." If disaster is coming, is it better to be ignorant that it's coming, or wise enough to see that it's coming, if you can't do anything to change it?

### Hope? "Under the Sun" or "Under Heaven"?

Well, are we excited yet? Maybe you're starting to agree with those who think this book is just bleak and hopeless. After all, the last word of chapter 1 is "*sorrow.*" But hold on, because we are going somewhere. If you're looking for a cure to life's ills, it is essential to begin with a proper diagnosis.

Notice that throughout this opening chapter – indeed, throughout much of Ecclesiastes – Solomon is describing life “*under the sun*.” He uses that phrase three times in this chapter, and he’ll go on to use it some 23 more times in the remaining 11 chapters. “*Under the sun*” is a way of referring to life in this world.

Some people think this is a reference to life without God, to the life of atheists and unbelievers. But that’s not really accurate. Solomon is describing life in this world, limited to this world. “*Under the sun*” is a Hebrew expression for the time-bound nature of life in this world, as opposed to eternity. That’s why life “*under the sun*” is a vapor, a mere breath. Man is a mere breath, in terms of our mortality.

Even believers experience the realities of life “*under the sun*.” We, too, feel the relentlessness of boredom, the insatiable nature of our appetites and longings, the frequent futility and frustration of our work and our dull routines. We cannot find our soul’s satisfaction in life “*under the sun*,” whether we believe in God or not.

Solomon also used the phrase “*under heaven*” in verse 13. He will go on to use this phrase twice more – phrase, much less frequently than “*under the sun*,” but very significantly. Life “*under the sun*” is vanity and vapor, but life “*under heaven*” carries with it the idea of being given by God, having a divine givenness to it.

And this is where we part ways dramatically with Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher of unyielding despair. For perhaps if life were absolutely limited to life “*under the sun*,” then Russell may have been right. But life, even this short life in this world, is also lived “*under heaven*.” That means it is not utterly meaningless, and why I think “*meaningless*” is not a great translation of *hebel*.

Sometimes what God gives people “*under heaven*” is an unhappy business, as in verse 13 – “*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.*” This is honest.

But it is not purposeless. For Solomon will use the phrase “*under heaven*” at the beginning of chapter 3 to say, “*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter [or purpose] under heaven.*” This chapter, made into song by The Birds, tells us of order, meaning, and purpose for all things “*under heaven*.”

Life is short. Life is hard. Life in this world is a vapor. It will soon pass away, and we cannot really ever get a grasp on it. It is full of sorrow, vexation, and waste – fruitless toil, relentless cycles, insatiable appetites, weariness, and staleness. But life is not without purpose, and to find the key to life, we have to start by seeing how ultimately unsatisfying life “*under the sun*” is and how it can never meet the deepest longings of our heart.

In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis says, “*If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.*” This is ultimately where Ecclesiastes is leading us – not to a religious escapism or some pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by, but to a realization that this world will never satisfy us, because we were made for something more.

One man lived a life of superior wisdom than Solomon: Jesus of Nazareth. He spoke words of even greater beauty, power, wisdom, and insight. He stands out from the relentless sameness of human

history as a man without parallel, a man without equal. He said to those of us living life “under the sun,” *“I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10) He said, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* – Matthew 11:28-29, ESV

Jesus is unique and powerful because He alone opened up the way for us to have life – real life – beyond this life “*under the sun.*” In His resurrection from the dead, Jesus overthrew death from the tyranny it holds over the human race. In His resurrection, He set free *“all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”* (Hebrews 2:15)

Through Jesus, we can stare down the vaporous nature of life “*under the sun*” and acknowledge without fear that it can never satisfy us and yet not be left with “*unyielding despair,*” because we know we have more than life “*under the sun.*” We have real, eternal life in Jesus Himself, who is the Resurrection and the Life. It’s my prayer for you that you will find this real life in Jesus as we study Ecclesiastes in the coming weeks.