

Week 1 - Does the Treadmill Go Anywhere? - Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Scripture Reading: Psalm 39:1-6

Introduction

Why Ecclesiastes?

I've been asked that by several of you since I announced that it would be our next sermon series.

And based on the way the question was asked, I could tell I had surprised at least some of you.

Some of you asked with a furrowed brow as if maybe you needed to be concerned about my mental or emotional state.

And I don't suppose I helped alleviate those concerns when I said Ecclesiastes is one of my favorite books of the Bible - but it is.

Have you ever wondered how people cope today if they don't have faith in God?

Kathy and I often rhetorically pose that question to each other.

If you want to understand our world today - read and understand Ecclesiastes because it's a window to the worldview of most of the people we encounter as we go out into the world.

In Ecclesiastes, the author looks at life from a human perspective.

He isn't an atheist - after all, there aren't any true atheists when one digs deeply enough - but he looks at the world around him through the lens of at least a semi-agnostic and essentially leaves God out of his calculations.

In other words, he describes the worldview of most people today - and that's why I chose it.

When someone prepares to go to a foreign land to be a missionary, they typically study the Bible and the culture of the place where they are going.

The reason for Bible study is obvious - the Bible is where the answers are - but the questions reside in the culture.

So, since we are missionaries to our culture, we need to put ourselves in the place of those we're trying to reach.

We need to attempt to see things from their perspective, wrestle with their questions, and feel their confusion and despair.

To do that, we need to keep ourselves from jumping to the immediate, easy answer and suppress the temptation to introduce God too quickly.

We need to take the time to fully embrace and understand what life without God looks and feels like to see how best to speak to those struggling with the same issues as the author describes.

If we can suspend our tendency to resolve the tension too quickly, I believe we will also better understand how to insert God into the picture when speaking with those who don't yet know him.

It's been said that truly understanding something means you can explain it to a child and illustrate it in multiple ways.

Maybe you have difficulty understanding why a good and powerful God allows evil on the Earth or how to resolve life's other myriad inconsistencies and conundrums - the tough questions people still wrestle with today.

If so, you'll find this study valuable because the author examines life's puzzles honestly and captures the frustration and futility of our fallen world while showing what will happen to anyone who chooses to live without God.

I expect there will be times when we find the book frustrating, confusing, and perhaps even depressing - but that's life without God, and we need to feel those things.

Because doing so will show us how to observe, understand, and speak to our culture and, I hope, lead us to a better understanding of how God works and strengthen our own faith as well.

There are many good reasons for a Christ-follower to study Ecclesiastes.

But it's also for those who are still questioning and deciding what they can trust and what they should believe.

It's a book that's as much for skeptics as it is for believers because it reveals the meaning of life.

So Ecclesiastes is as much a gateway for those who are open but not yet committed to God as it is a backdoor for the believer who sometimes has doubts and questions about what they see going on around them.

As we begin this morning, we will become familiar with the book's author.

Then, we'll look at the author's motto that establishes the tone of the book and a key term he uses nearly forty times.

Finally, the author illustrates the truth of his motto as he looks at life on planet Earth.

Let's begin by considering the identity of the author.

I. The Author: Qoheleth

Tradition has typically attributed the authorship of Ecclesiastes to Solomon, and there is much to support the claim.

Let's look at verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 1:1**] together:

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

Solomon was David's son and became king in Jerusalem after David.

Furthermore, many of the details the author shares sound like they were pulled directly from the life of Solomon.

However, more recently, scholarship has started to move away from identifying Solomon as the author, and there are good reasons to do so.

First, Solomon is openly declared to be the author of Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, but his name is never mentioned in Ecclesiastes.

It seems curious that if the author was Solomon and wanted the book to carry his authority, he didn't openly claim authorship.

Second, the details that mesh well with Solomon's life are found predominantly in the first two chapters, but then he seems to be left behind as the book progresses.

And some statements later in the book are difficult to imagine coming from Solomon, such as when he criticizes wealthy kings and their officials in chapter 5.

Then, he's introduced in the third person before the narrative moves to a first-person account, only to return to the third person again at the end, which has caused some scholars to think the book may have another author.

It's not uncommon for people to write fictional autobiographies where the author takes on the persona and voice of a famous person.

Everyone knows it's a literary device that isn't meant to deceive, and it's possible the author took a well-known historical figure and used his life to make a spiritual point.

And who better to use for the purposes of this book than Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived?

There are other reasons to doubt that Solomon was the author, but they are somewhat academic, and I don't want to spend a lot of time going through all of them because we can't come to a definitive answer anyway.

Ultimately, the view that Solomon is the author is likely the most natural way to approach the text, and it does not harm the text if we do.

Either way, we need to remember whether Solomon himself wrote Ecclesiastes or someone penned it in the voice of Solomon; the Holy Spirit superintended the writing, and it contains God's own words.

Furthermore, it's plain to see that the details, perspectives, and lessons are meant to be understood as coming from the context of Solomon's life and his perspective, even if he wasn't the author.

But back to our text, in our ESV Bible, we see the author referred to as “*the Preacher*.”

The Hebrew word translated as “the Preacher” is *Qoheleth* (pronounced ko-hell-eth), which is itself somewhat tricky to translate.

Qoheleth is connected to the Hebrew concept of assembling and that assembling or collecting can be people or things. So, Qoheleth is typically seen as either a gatherer of people or a collator of material.

Of the two choices, the one that has traditionally been understood is the convening of an assembly of people, a congregation, and that’s where our translation of Qoheleth into “preacher” comes from.

Other English versions follow the ESV and use “preacher,” and some translate the word as “teacher.”

However, I will follow the practice of modern scholarship and refer to the author by the proper name, Qoheleth, as we go through this series.

It would be difficult to miss Qoheleth’s purpose in writing Ecclesiastes as he opens the book in verse 2 with a motto of sorts that will prove to be his theme [**Ecclesiastes 1:2**].

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

II. The Motto: All is hebel

Used five times in verse 2 alone, the Hebrew word for vanity is *hebel*.

All told, Qoheleth uses it 39 times in Ecclesiastes as he pronounces his evaluation of the entirety of human existence, declaring it utterly meaningless.

Then he takes the following twelve chapters to prove his point in excruciating detail before returning to the very same statement in 12:8 [**Ecclesiastes 12:8**] *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*

Like the name and identity of Qoheleth, the word *hebel* is challenging to define.

Unfortunately, our English word, vanity, has come to describe excessive pride, but that’s not what Qoheleth means.

Hebel literally means “vapor” or “breath,” and it calls to mind the puff of steam we see as we breathe out on a cold day.

Qoheleth says life is like that.

James says something similar in **James 4:14** when he describes the transitory nature of life, saying life is only a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Life is momentary and mysterious, lacking substance or permanence.

Hebel is as close as you can get to nothing, so insubstantial you couldn’t possibly take hold of it.

Notice Qoheleth twice uses the repetitious “vanity of vanities,” which, in Hebrew, expresses that something rises to the highest degree - think of the “holy of holies” in the tabernacle and temple.

His assessment is that we’re here today and gone tomorrow, and all of life is empty, pointless, useless, and absurd - all is vanity.

I think we can all agree that’s a pretty gloomy assessment and why people consider Ecclesiastes depressing.

Qoheleth comes off as a pessimist’s pessimist - although a true pessimist would probably say he’s just being a realist.

But we need to pause here and ask, “Is his assessment true?”

The plain meaning of the word “all” is everything.

So, is Qoheleth saying that *everything*, including godliness and perhaps even God himself, is vanity?

Although Qoheleth is in no hurry to answer that question directly, he hints at his thinking by using a little three-word phrase in verse 3 that he repeats another 27 times in the course of the book - “*under the sun*.”

As he describes the futility and transitory nature of work, wisdom, pleasure, and everything that makes up life itself, he repeatedly says that this is what things are like “under the sun.”

In this way, he subtly but clearly makes it known that the scene he describes is the world we see from ground level.

He is setting the boundaries of his consideration at the limits of what is visible from the purely human perspective of one who doesn't lift his eyes to consider God.

His purpose is to meet the general public on the street where they live and show them the futility of their lives and all their pursuits - how everything they think gives life meaning is nothing but a breath that can only leave them empty.

Qoheleth has the means, wisdom, and determination to travel down every path until he reaches its end and reveals that it ultimately leads nowhere - that all our pursuits “under the sun” come to nothing.

Ultimately, he will lead us to the realization that there is no true meaning or lasting happiness until we find it in God.

But he won't get us there quickly, and we need to patiently walk alongside him so that when we arrive, we have the understanding we need to guide others along the path to God.

Moving on, in verses 3-11, Qoheleth turns to an illustration of the vanity of life.

III. The Illustration: The treadmill of life

We've already had a sneak peek at verse 3, but let's read the entire section together [**Ecclesiastes 1:3-11**]

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. 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. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 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. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.

The first thing we see is that Qoheleth has a motivation for life - he is looking to profit from it.

I like the way the Good News Translation renders verse 3 - *You spend all your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for it?*

Qoheleth seems to say he doesn't mind working hard but wants a good return for his efforts, but his question is rhetorical, and the implied answer is that there is no gain to be had.

Perhaps we would admit that our hard work might not net us anything when we die, but at least we leave something for our descendants, making their lives better - and there's value in that.

Anticipating that response, Qoheleth looks next at the cyclical nature of the universe, first taking examples from nature and then from human experience.

When we think of the passage of time and the march of succeeding generations, we like to imagine that we're making progress, but it's an illusion because nothing truly changes.

What is a generation of mankind when viewed against the backdrop of the earth?

Each generation that's born sees a previous generation pass away, and the members of each generation are soon forgotten.

The younger generation eventually becomes the older generation that is all too quickly displaced by an even younger generation - and on and on it goes.

The gap between the generations also remains the same - the old seem out of touch to the young, and the young seem disrespectful of the old; it's always been that way, and so it will remain.

Consider how, over two millennia ago, Socrates wrote: “The children love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect to their elders.”

Each generation hopes to leave a mark and make things better for those who come after them, but the world remains relatively unchanged despite all that.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west day after day after day in an unrelenting procession of sameness.

The rock band Pink Floyd echoes the sentiment of Qoheleth in their song *Time* from their album titled Dark Side of the Moon, saying:

You run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking,
Racing around to come up behind you again.
The sun is the same in a relative way, but you're older,
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death.

But, according to Qoheleth, the sun also gets out of breath, as the Hebrew word translated here as “hastens” is actually the word for “pant,” suggesting that perhaps even the sun gets weary of the unending sameness.

The wind is the same as it blows round and round, accomplishing little by its progress.

Likewise, the flow of water seems just as pointless as all the streams and rivers run to the sea but are never sufficient to fill it up.

The cyclical nature of the world can, of course, speak to us of God’s order in creation and gracious provision to mankind.

Lamentations 3:22-23 tells us:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Genesis 8:22 speaks of the march of the seasons and the cycle of day and night and how God promised their continuation as evidence of his faithfulness.

We come to a very different place when we bring God into the picture, but we aren’t there yet, and we need to continue to consider things from the “under the sun” perspective.

And when we look at natural phenomena and try to find meaning in them alone, we can only conclude, as Qoheleth does in verse 8 [**Ecclesiastes 1:8a**], that the never-ending cycle of nature seems pointless and full of weariness.

In the final analyses, it’s more boring than words can express.

Turning his attention to people, Qoheleth discovers that we are no different than nature.

Verse 8 continues by showing how, like the sea, we can never be filled [**Ecclesiastes 1:8b**].

Human sensory perception is insatiable.

We constantly look and listen, yet our eyes and ears are never filled.

Modern technology allows us to consume audio and visual content every waking moment, and it’s still not enough.

Social media, streaming services, the 24-hour news cycle, smartphones, and other electronic conveniences are always available, and our fear of missing out drives us to consume content constantly - but we aren’t ever satisfied.

No matter how much we consume, we soon return for more of the endless parade of sounds and images.

Like the sea, we are insatiable; there is no end, no accomplishment, and no gain - we just get tired.

Turning to human history, Qoheleth pronounces in verse 9 [**Ecclesiastes 1:9**]

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.

Philosopher George Santayana is credited with the often-repeated quote:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Qoheleth has news for you - even those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it because human nature remains the same, and we keep doing the same things over and over in a never-ending cycle.

But how literally should we take Qoheleth’s pronouncement that there is nothing new under the sun?

No one, least of all Qoheleth, would deny the inventiveness of mankind.

Given the all-encompassing nature of his claim, we are immediately tempted to think of some example to prove him wrong - surely, there must be at least one thing we can point to that’s new under the sun.

Qoheleth anticipated that very thing in verse 10 [**Ecclesiastes 1:10**] before denying it.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, and even the technological advances we might point to and say, “See, this is new,” prove only to be incremental refinements of things that have been around forever.

Even the latest technological developments fall within familiar categories of human experience, such as communication, computation, transportation, and so forth.

The only reason things seem new is because we tend to forget the past, as Qoheleth points out in verse 11 [**Ecc 1:11**]

Humanity suffers from a kind of historical amnesia, and what seems shiny and new is often the rehashing of something old that we have simply forgotten.

For example, every school-aged kid in America knows what happened in 1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

But we forget that several others traveled across the ocean and even fished off the shores of North America before Columbus “discovered” it.

We also tend to think of the United States as the first great civilization of North America.

But there were people here long before us.

The Anasazi people built a large city in New Mexico with five-story building containing hundreds of rooms.

The Cahokia community near present-day St. Louis grew to 40,000 people and was the largest city on the continent until Philadelphia surpassed it in the 18th century.

But we have largely forgotten such things, and the day is coming when we will likewise be forgotten.

Seriously, it’s unlikely any of us will be remembered as anything more than a name on the family tree beyond two or, at most, three generations.

Conclusion

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. All things are full of weariness.”

Viewed from the vantage point of life “under the sun,” Qoheleth’s perspective seems to be the only reasonable one.

Nature keeps chugging along as it always has, with no observable purpose or end in sight.

History is more of an endless cycle of repetition than a straight line toward a future goal.

Everything we see, hear, and experience - even our lives - is no more substantial than a puff of air; the vapor of a warm breath on a cold day that hangs around for an instant and then is gone, having had no impact that matters.

We work and toil but accomplish nothing that lasts, and we are soon forgotten once we have passed off the scene.

Qoheleth has deliberately limited his perspective to what one sees and experiences in the world, and he wants us to feel the full weight and weariness of the futility of life under the sun.

He wants to bring us to the point where we begin to fear that his assessment is the only one that makes sense.

And so it is if “under the sun” is all there is because, when viewed from that perspective alone, nothing *can* matter.

However, we know that “under the sun” isn’t all there is, and life isn’t an endless stream of futility.

But for the vast majority of people - and certainly the people we need to reach with the gospel - “under the sun” is the sum of their existence.

Qoheleth’s perspective is their perspective, which explains so much of what we see in our world today.

Most people rise each morning and go through the daily grind only to return home to the same limited leisure pursuits of yesterday and the day before that - even their meals seem to follow the same repetitious cycle.

Even their leisure time is spent doing things that long ago lost their novelty.

Everything is predictable, nothing satisfies for long, and it’s hard to see the point of it all.

Life’s a drag, and then you die is a popular motto for a reason.

Everyone is searching for significance - to believe oneself significant is a basic human desire.

And the realization that everything is passing away and everything is vanity causes ever more desperate attempts to find some way to matter or, at least, deny or dull the pain of insignificance.

Our goal is to put ourselves in their place, walk around in their shoes, and see through their eyes so that we can understand how to effectively show them that there is more to life than what is visible “under the sun.”

Let’s pray.