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“The Worthy Life in a Worthless World”

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 1, Ecclesiastes chapter 1. Let’s start reading in verse 1 and we will read down through verse 11.

Wow – that was an encouraging section of Scripture! It is no surprise to you that the book of Ecclesiastes is the favorite book of the Bible of atheists and agnostics. They read its message through their own pessimistic lenses and they let it harden them in their unbelief. Maybe you have had a similar experience with this book. It has been one of the most misunderstood and maligned books of the Bible by Christian people, and maybe it has fallen on hard times in your own experience. Maybe you weren’t even sure where it was in your Bible because it has been so long since you have spent any amount of time there. You’ve read its pessimistic message in the past, and that was enough for you.

Well, I have some bad news for you! We are starting this morning a series on the book of Ecclesiastes that will take us through the better part of the Summer months. But my bad news is given to you tongue in cheek. I don’t think this is bad news at all! I am glad for the opportunity to turn your attention over the next many weeks to this most important book. Many have thought of this book as the black sheep of the sheepfold of God’s revelation. The only book that was probably written on a Monday morning, and the only book really capable of putting us into a Monday morning attitude no matter what day of the week it is. And so, it is easy to think that Ecclesiastes lessens the brightness of the glorious light of God’s revelation. If you think of God’s Word as a beautiful rainbow in which each book contributes its own amazing color, it would be easy to look at Ecclesiastes and surmise that its color does not add to the beauty of the rainbow, but greatly detracts from it. But, I want to spend the rest of the time this morning – and really the rest of the series on this book – making known to you the glory of God as seen in this great book. The style of this book combined with the emphasis and unmistakable message do not detract from the glory of Scripture, but rather add a needed hue to it. In other words, God is more glorified because Ecclesiastes is in the canon – not less. It is an addition, not a subtraction.

Before I make the case for you from chapter 1 about why we should spend time reading, studying, and being transformed by this book – let me help you understand a bit about why you don’t like a book like Ecclesiastes. It is not because it is too complicated to understand, but rather because it is abundantly clear. It speaks the piercing truth about life and the struggle of mankind to find meaning and purpose and profit in life. And as T.S. Eliot has said – “Humankind doesn’t do well with reality.” We do pretty well when we live in the nice pleasantries of the surface existence in this world. But when we actually stop and consider the harsh realities of life

and when we try to put it all together into a cohesive whole – then the wheels start to come off. So, we numb ourselves with entertainment and busyness and work and family – and we jump from one glimpse of joy or satisfaction to another, but we hardly stop to ask the hard questions – because we know that we will not like the answers. Mankind doesn't do well with reality. And so, we read the book of Ecclesiastes and we are confronted with a message which cuts to the chase and gets directly to the point – and this catches us off guard. But, as I have said, it is what we need, even if it is not what we would choose.

Over the next few minutes, I want to make the case to you that you need the book of Ecclesiastes. I say this to lay down the foundation for our church family as we embark on this study together over the next many weeks, but I also say this to those of you who are visiting with us this morning. Maybe you haven't thought much about this book before, or spent much time reading it and considering its message, but I trust that these next few minutes will be used by God's Spirit to open your heart to this important book of Scripture. We need to listen to this book because it's from a speaker we should listen to and it has a message we need to hear and it answers the question we are all asking.

I. It's From a Speaker We Should Listen To – vs. I

- a. Verse 1 gives us the necessary information about the speaker in this book to let us know that we should listen to him. We should listen because his book is in the Scripture and is inspired by God and is profitable for us for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. But we should also listen to him because of who he is. We should be compelled by the facts of verse one to tune our ears to hear what he has to say. The author identifies himself for us as the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- b. Being a king in Jerusalem gives this man access to all that is available to him in every facet of life. Everything that there was to offer for life in 1000 BC when this book was written, this man had access to it because he was the king in Jerusalem at her heyday. She was a world power ever rising to greater prominence. This kingly author is easily identified as Solomon – the only direct son of David to legitimately sit on his throne in Jerusalem. Many modern commentators question the validity of identifying the author as Solomon. They point to the fact that he is never directly named in the book, and the style of Hebrew is closer to 300 BC than to 1000 BC. But there is no obvious reason in the book to go with this conclusion. Solomon is the most likely author, and if by some chance he is not the author, the one who pens these words is using Solomon's life to illustrate the truth he is presenting in the book. I am taking Solomon to be the author, and this means that as the king in Jerusalem he is extremely wealthy, powerful, and able to experience anything his current world offers. He also is the wisest man to ever walk the planet, save our Lord Jesus Christ. So, here are the words of the great king of Israel, Solomon – the son of David who was given to him as a fulfillment of the promise of God. His kingdom is vast and prosperous, and in many ways he is beginning to see the promises of the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12 coming to fruition under his reign.

- c. But in this book, he is not writing to us as a king, or even as a son of David – but as a preacher. Being a king and a son of David are his experience and his unique credentials, but his purpose in writing is to bring a message. His platform of unique experience and of gaining varied perspectives through his wise investigation as king has brought him to the place of burden. He has a message he wants us to hear – he is a preacher!
- d. The Hebrew word behind our English word “preacher” simply means someone who speaks in the assembly. When the Old Testament was translated to Greek they used the word for the gathering of the church to translate this word – ekklesia – ecclesiastous – ecclesiastes. In other words, Solomon has called the people together and he is delivering a final message to his people before his death. We know he is in his final years because of the way he writes in this book, but particularly in how he describes life in chapters 11 and 12. So, here is the final message from the wisest man to walk the earth. After having experienced it all, he calls us together because he has a burden to share – he has a message to preach.

II. It Has a Message We Must Hear – vs. 2

- a. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. That is his message. It is his unmistakable thesis which he will set out to prove through the rest of the book. He couldn’t make the point any clearer could he? Of the 10 words in the original in verse 2, half of them are the same word – hebel – vanity. In the English, there are 12 words, and 5 of them are the same word – “vanity!” It is such an important word in this sermon, that it will be used 38 times, in 30 different verses. It appears in every chapter, except in chapter 10. This is the big idea of his sermon – the point he wants to have ringing in your ears as you sit down at the lunch table for roast preacher. He wants you to know so very clearly this point – vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
- b. Notice the exclusivity of this statement. When you say vanity of vanities you are pointing out that this thing is the vainest of all vain things. Vanity, by the way, will take on several different nuances throughout the book. It will point to something being totally meaningless, or to something being absurd, or futile, or pointless, or useless, or elusive and transitory – like trying to catch the wind. The preacher’s message is that there is something that is the vainest of them all – the most pointless the meaningless of meaningless, the absurd of absurdity, the futile of futility. And what is that you say? Everything! All is vanity.
- c. Now, if that was all that the preacher said, then we could just all leave our Bibles right there in the pew and head out the door of this church building and eat, drink, sleep, and be merry – because obviously nothing matters because it is all vain and hopeless and absurd! But thankfully that is not where the sermon ends. It is an effective hook to grab your attention and lure you in to figure out what he means by saying that everything is meaningless.
- d. His sermon continues in verse 3 – What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? In just a minute we will see how that question is the question we are all asking, whether we know it or not. But for now, notice the phrase – under the sun. It is a phrase that is only used in the OT here in Ecclesiastes – it

appears in no other book. It is used 29 times in the book, but the really interesting thing is the connection between the statements in the book about things being meaningless and hopeless and vain and this phrase “under the sun.” A right understanding of this phrase and its relationship to vanity is the key to unlocking the message of this book. I mentioned that the word vanity is used in 30 different verses in this book. Of those 30 verses, the phrase “under the sun” is also used in close proximity 17 times. So, the reality of everything being vain is closely connected to this idea of being “under the sun”.

- e. What we are going to see throughout our study of this book is that the preacher is adopting a humanistic and secular worldview with this phrase – “under the sun.” He is limiting himself to the here and now existence of mankind and he is trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together by looking at all the stuff of life to try and help him figure out the why of life. And what he has already concluded in verse 2 is that the stuff of life cannot give us the meaning of life. We can’t rightly understand this life we’ve been given to live by our Creator God, by looking to our surroundings, or our wealth, or our wisdom, or our work, or the normal course of life. All of those things, when closely examined will lead us to the same conclusion of the Preacher – it is vanity of vanities. All is vanity!
- f. And this is a message we need to hear from a man who is uniquely positioned by God to tell us with great clarity and authority. We are so prone to make meaning for life out of the stuff of life. Whether we realize it or not we easily and innately look to our money and our possessions and our circumstances as the pathway which will lead us to having a life which is worth living in this world. But the Preacher calls us up short in dramatic fashion – that is all worthless – under the sun. Over the weeks ahead I trust we will understand more of why this is true, and ultimately we will be turned to the only right answer for understanding the purpose and meaning of life so that we can live a life worth living!

III. It Answers the Question We are Asking – vs. 3-11

- a. We also must listen to the message from this preacher because it answers the question we are all asking. You may not know that you are asking this question, but you are. It is the question which is found in verse 3. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? The presumed answer to this question based upon what he said in verse 2 is – nothing. There is no gain for mankind in light of all the toil with which he toils under the sun. The preacher proves this in verses 4-11 by pointing to different facets of our existence under the sun which make known the vanity of it all.
- b. So, in verse 4 he proves this by pointing to the constant passing of generations. A generation of people occupy the face of the earth, but then they pass away and another generation comes. They face the same struggles and have mostly the same experiences. But the earth remains the same through all the generations. The unchanging reality of the earth is then explained in verses 5-7. The sun rises and sets and hastens to rise again. The wind blows to the south and then to the north and then around and around it goes on its circuits. The streams run to the sea but the sea is not full. Old Man River just keeps chugging along. Like the early church

pastor Jerome has said – “What is more vain than this vanity: that the earth, which was made for humans, stays – but humans themselves, the lords of the earth, suddenly dissolve in the dust?”

- c. No wonder the preacher concludes this thought with exasperation in verse 8 – All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it. In other words – all this constant and ongoing sameness in the earth which is countered by the ever passing generation of man – it is all so wearisome – so much so that we can’t even put words to it all.
- d. Listen – some of you haven’t thought about this before – and some of you have thought about it more than you should without the right Biblical lens. For those of you in your early years of life – you have so many experiences and normal joys of this life ahead of you that it is hard to imagine that it is all so wearisome. Those of us in middle age are starting to wonder – what is my life all about. On that day of my death – what will have really mattered? Those of you in your later years of life are questioning if it has been worth it all – has your life actually been worth living? Those are really sober questions and really hard realities to think through. And remember – humankind doesn’t do well with reality. But this is the message we need to hear and this is the answer to the question we all need to consider.
- e. The preacher continues in verse 8 to prove his point that all this toil in life brings no profit. He says that the eye is never satisfied with seeing and the ear is never full of hearing. This is the unique experience of man. We are created with an insatiable desire for more. We look at the world around us and we want to know about it and investigate it. Animals don’t have that because they are not made in the image of God. They have the capacity to live in God’s world, but not the capacity to make sense of God’s world. But mankind is insatiable in his desire to search and know and see and hear. But this constant searching never leaves us satisfied. We never find what we are looking for. And that is because of the conclusion in verses 9-11.
 - 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. 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.
- f. The constancy of the cycles of the earth are matched by the constancy of the cycles of mankind. Though we desire to make some true improvement to our world for the next generation – in reality – the world will continue on like it has been. There will be nothing truly new under the sun. This does not mean that there is not progress and creativity in mankind’s experience, but it does mean that the creativity of this generation will be forgotten by the creativity of the next generation – and they will all be in the same vein. There is truly nothing new under the sun. We cannot create *ex nihilo* – out of nothing – to make something which is truly new. All we can do is creatively take that which God has made and reshape it for new and different uses. We can advance in that sense in our use of

things which He has made and He has designed, but when you look down deep – there is nothing which is truly new.

- g. If you take that past the gadgets and gizmos and inventions and you take that to the experience of one generation to the next, the point becomes all the more poignant. Remember, the guiding question here is – what profit does mankind have for all its toil? For there to be true profit for mankind then there would need to be new and real progress, but in reality, it is all really cyclical and similar. There is nothing new under the sun. Every generation has wanted to change the world. Every generation has longed for peace. Every generation has been at war. Every generation has made progress. Every generation has digressed. Every generation has forgotten the lessons of history. Every generation has created lessons for future generations to study – and forget. Every generation has faced its crises – overcoming some and falling to most. Every generation has tried to operate in God's world without God. Every generation has come up with its own and various ways to make peace with God. There is truly nothing new under the sun.
- h. But this is what sits at the heart of our constant unrest. Our endless scrolling through Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. Our endless attention to cable news, or our turning to our email to see if there is a new one for us to read. We are longing for something new – something better – something which will add to significance and meaning. Something that will actually bring profit to us.
- i. And that brings us back to verse 3 and the question we are all asking and all need an answer to. This is the presumed purpose and great goal in life – personal gain. We inherently and universally want all things to add to us. If we don't personally profit from something then why bother doing it?! That is the sentiment which resides deep in each of our hearts. And every worldview – every way of piecing together all the facts about life – everyone, but the right one that is – every worldview has this big picture of personal gain in mind when trying to put together the puzzle of life. Think of this as trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together. As you look at life and all of its many pieces – the circumstances, the family dynamics, the work situation, your possessions, wisdom, etc. – you are trying to piece them all together in a way which makes sense of it all and give you a way forward in living a life that is worth living in this world. But in our human-centered way of thinking – the box lid that we have at the table has this picture on it – what is the profit for me in all of this? And so with that picture guiding our hands we take the stuff of life and we try to piece it together to make sense of it all – and it never works. That is the point of this sermon by this preacher. It is to answer this question of “what is the profit for mankind under the sun?” The answer? Vanity of vanities – all is vanity. If that is our question, then this will be our answer.
- j. And this man-centered view of the purpose of life began in our earliest days as the human race. In the Garden of Eden our first parents were confronted with this man-centered view of life which has as its main question – what profit is there for me in all of this? Remember the crafty deceit of the Serpent in the Garden? He

twisted the words of God and he asked questions and then he reinterpreted reality. And this culminated in him saying that God was withholding something from Adam and Eve by restricting their enjoyment of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He promised them that they would have great gain if they simply ate the fruit. He lured them in to see their world through the lens of them. To act in the moment in the way which would bring them the most personal profit and gain. And this is what mankind has been doing ever since apart from the grace of God. Our hopeless worldview which looks to the stuff of life for the purpose of life is rooted in the Garden where we as a human race rebelled against God because we thought it was of more profit than obedience.

- k. At the end of this book, the Preacher is going to conclude his sermon by calling us to Fear God and Keep His Commandments. That is exactly what was countered and rejected in the Garden. The Serpent deceived Eve and lured Adam into forgetting God and abandoning His Commandments. And we all know how that worked out for them. Was there any profit in that way? No, vanity of vanities – it was all vanity!
- l. This Preacher knows that way of life too. As we will see in our text for next week, he spent a good amount of his life chasing meaning and worth and satisfaction by looking for gain for himself in the things of life. And as the wisest man on the planet, he became the greatest fool. And now he wants you to know, through this sermon, that the way of the fool which has as its guiding question – what profit is there for me? – is the way of absolute and complete vanity. That way will make a fool out of you! And that is what we all need to see in the weeks ahead. We need this message from this preacher to penetrate our lives and expose our hidden secularism and our hidden humanism. None of us intend to look at life through the lens of the here and now with little thought for God. But, the worldliness of the church in this day and age points us to a practical humanism and a practical secularism. And so, we need this book to tear back our layers and help us see it, and more importantly – help us see God!

Conclusion: That is what this sermon by this preacher is all about. He wants us to see more of God. It is a book that is a lot like the book of Job. In Job's story of tragedy and bitter providence, we see his wrestling with trying to figure it all out, and then we see God enter in and bring Job to his knees in worship. He sees the vastness of God and the greatness of the majesty and character of God and he shuts his lips and stands in awe of the God of Heaven and His complete righteousness – even in the hardest things in this life. For Job, the experience of life drove his philosophizing about life. He tried to hammer out the why's of life on the anvil of the what's of life. And when God broke in, he fell on his face in worship of the great and glorious God of Heaven.

The same thing happens to Solomon in Ecclesiastes. The what's of life drive Solomon to examine the why's of life, and ultimately it leads him back to the Maker and Giver of life. He falls on his face before God in humble worship as he realizes the great vacuum that is left in the meaning of life when God is removed from the equation. What this Preacher does in this sermon is he takes you down the path of vanity to ultimately lead you to the only place where meaning can be

found. He takes you to the Garden of hope through the gate of hopelessness and despair. He invites you into the eternal library of meaning through the door of absurdity. He leads you to the Throne of God by way of the end of mankind. In other words – he empties you of all meaning, so that he can show you the true meaning and worth which is found only in Christ. Will you become foolish in the world's eyes to become wise in the fear of the Lord? Let's pray.